

KATHY HUBBARD

BEFORE The Scripture Reading for today is taken from the Letter of Paul to the Romans, Chapter 8. Selected Verses.

It is found on page 983 in the Bible that is in the pews in the event you wish to follow along.

(Allow about 10 seconds for people to locate the page before you begin to read....)

READING "For I reckon that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory which shall be revealed in us.

And we know that all things work together for good to them that love God!

What shall we then say to these things? If God be for us, who can be against us?

Who shall separate us from the love of Christ?

Shall tribulation,
or distress,
or persecution,
of famine,
or nakedness,
or peril,
or sword?

NAY, in all these things we are more than conquerors through HIM that loved us!

For I am persuaded, that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor powers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor height, nor depth, nor any other creature, shall be able to separate us from the LOVE OF GOD, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord!

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CLOSING "Thus endeth the reading of the Holy Scripture. May God add His blessing to the reading of His word and to our understanding of it.

THANKS BE TO GOD. AMEN."

at least one mystical religious experience, an awareness of the presence of God at a rather deep level. And I would wager there would be more of us who had that experience were we to cultivate our openness.

WITNESS OF CHRISTIAN EXPERIENCE / 20 CENTURIES

If this is still not definitive for you, let me call to your attention the witness of 20 centuries of Christian experience: that God revealed His love to us in a person, Jesus of Nazareth. And in this great act God entered our lives to share them and to redeem them, He actually entered into the arena of life as we know it. And in Jesus the Christ the message of God's love comes to us so clearly and with such compelling beauty that it cannot be mistaken.

But how do you know the love is for you? I cannot prove it to you, nor can anyone else. Only by making the VENTURE OF LIVING by the assurance it is true, will you know its truth for you. To know that God loves you enables you to face the doubts and hazards that assail you with courage and determination. I believe that. To know that God loves you means we can undergo pain or defeat or grief in the assurance that "in everything God works for good with those who love Him. I understand that. To know God loves you helps you to battle the temptation to self-indulgence, self-pity, self-aggrandizement in the confidence that we can do all things through Him who strengthens us. I know that to be true in my own life.

Those who are willing to take the risk and the venture discover the possibility of God's love turns into probability and probability into unfailing assurance. And on that we build our lives.

CLOSING STORY

Let me close with a story from my family. I do not very often tell stories about my children for it embarrasses them too much, but I am going to break my habit this morning. When our children were quite young we were watching a television re-run of the movie Tom Sawyer. You may remember that Tom has run away from home and is presumed dead. But he sneaks home to see his Aunt Polly again, leaves a token of his presence and then on impulse kisses the sleeping lady with great tenderness. At that point we were all teary, but our son, David, who was about 7 or 8 at the time said through his tears,

"It's so sad. He loves her and she doesn't know it."

The saddest thing I can imagine is not that God loves us and we don't know it, but that we need that love so much and cannot open ourselves to let it touch us and move us....and make a difference in our lives.

INVITATION

I invite you to let it happen to you here, this morning and in the days and weeks ahead. Let it begin now. Cultivate that openness so that God's love may touch your life in a meaningful and momentous way - to help you, heal you, forgive you, restore you. Let it happen and let us each, in our own way, pray for it to happen now.

PRAYER

Spirit of the Living God, fall afresh on us. Melt us. Mold us. Fill us. Use us. Spirit of the Living God, fall afresh on us. Amen

The next time he ventures to cross the street, a truck does run him down, and he is carried off to the hospital, mangled...but alive. "God loves me" he says gratefully. "He spared my life".

Mended and healed, he makes a third thrust into the whirl of traffic and this time he gets killed. "God loves him" says his friend. "He took him home!"

Now if you are a cynic, you will point out that God may love this man, but he cannot be said to do so in all of the three instances. The skeptic maintains that for us to say God loves a man equally well, whether he saves him from harm or spares his life or lets him get killed, is to throw logic to the winds.

Yet, it is just such an affirmation as this which the Christian makes. God can and does love that man, no matter what may happen to him. The questions of whether God loves him is not to be answered by trying to equate that love with our own particular idea as to what is good or bad for the man.

I think that when we make the mistake of measuring God's love for us by the way it fits into our particular idea of what that love should do for us, we begin to doubt whether that love can really be believed. We find ourselves wanting to believe God loves us but we are not going to believe it unless it coincides with our own love for ourselves. All our protests, "God can't love me or he wouldn't let this happen to me" bears the inflection of our wounded selves. Contrast that with this testimony.

A TESTIMONY John Wilhelm Rowntree was a brilliant young English historian who was to die in his 37th year. At the very time when the promise of his learning and his devout personal life was about to be fulfilled, he discovered that his eyesight was failing. The day came when his physician told him the truth. He would soon be totally blind.

He came out of the consultation into the street and stood in the sunlight for a few moments to collect himself. As he stood there, he wrote later he "suddenly felt the love of God wrap him about as though a visible presence enfolded him and a joy filled him such as he had never before known."

To be going blind, to be faced with darkness before one's bright hopes for the future can be fulfilled, to stand on the edge of suffering and despair and yet feel the love of God wrap us about as though a visible presence enfolds us - this is to know the love of God that Paul was writing about when he said,

"I am persuaded that neither death nor life, nor angels nor principalities nor powers, nor height nor depth nor any other creature shall be able to separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord."

My own personal experience is the same, for I have known that sense of enfolding presence again and again in my life, and it is the center on which everything else in my life hangs. I can hear some of you already saying, "That kind of experience is for the saints and preachers and special people. I've never felt that way and most people I know don't feel that way. How do I know God love me?"

Well, statistically you are wrong. Most people do know, even if they don't respond. In a poll taken last year, the majority of Americans reported that they had

The husband looked nonplussed, but recovered and remarked, "It sounds silly to me, doctor, but if you think it will do the trick, I'll bring her in every day so you can kiss her!" And hug her!

I'm sure you get the idea, and it is an important one - that all of us need the sense of knowing that we are cared about and loved by somebody.

BAD NEWS IS... The bad news is that there often does not seem to be enough love to go around. Every parent knows the conflict between what he or she wants to give to a child and what must be saved for one own's relationship with each other. Every lover suffers from wanting to meet the needs of the loved one and at the same time having enough left to meet one's own needs. Your child wants love, expressed by a bedtime story - but daddy must go to an important meeting. Too many marriages have gone on the rocks because one of the partners gives love without reserve while the other for a variety of reasons holds back and refuses to nourish in return. We cannot love others as they need to be loved.

James Thurber described this situation in a modern fairy story-tale, The White Deer. It's the story in the classic mode of a beautiful princess. Like all lovely princesses in fairy tales, she had fallen under the spell of a witch who changed her into a white deer. The king and his three sons find her in their hunting, but at the moment they would have shot her, she resumes her human form. They take her home to their castle but she cannot tell them her name. Neither the court historian, who like a psychiatrist delves into her past, nor the court philosopher who, like a college teacher, tries to explain her condition rationally, can help her recover her name or remember her country. Only, the spell ran, only when she has been "loved with a love that will not fail her thrice" will she remember who she is and from whence she has come.

In the fable, the youngest of the King's sons gives the princess "the love that will not fail her thrice" and she remembers her name, her lineage and the land she came from and they all live happily ever after. And isn't this a situation we can not only recognize, but also identify with rather easily? For like the princess, we are often in need of remembering who we are and to whom we belong. Like the mad witch, we bind ourselves with our own spells of confusion and unbelief. And like her, we are seeking a love that will not fail us nor turn away.

WHY WE NEED GOD To be blunt about it, that's why we need God - that we might be undergirded by a love that is not going to fail us. The testimony of the Scriptures and the experience of the human race is a record of God's faithfulness. By whatever metaphor it is described, the bottom line is a pledge of total faithfulness and caring. Our God is a God who does not let us go.

The problem as I experience it is that most of us would like to believe in a God who could love us that way but there just seems to be too much in our experience that contradicts this claim of faith. The very things that make us need God's love are the things that tempt us to believe that faith in the love of God is only a pious illusion.

PARABLE OF THE CYNIC John Castell used to tell the parable of the cynic: a man, he says, tries to cross a busy street. As he steps out into the traffic a truck bears down upon him, and only because it swerves at the last moment does he escape being run over. "God loves me" he says, "He saves me from injury".

"THE LOVE OF GOD"

INTRODUCTION

This morning I want to talk about a theme that is the very hub of Christianity and the center of our faith: the love of God and I would like to begin by telling you a story.

THE STORY

Some time ago Art Buchwald wrote a column about a man who was trying to save New York City. I think all of us would agree that this is a job that very much needs to be done. Buchwald says they were riding in a taxicab together and when they got out, the man paid the driver and said, "Thanks for the ride. You did a superb job at driving." Now the cab driver looked suspiciously at him and said, "Who are you...some kind of wise guy?"

Buchwald asked his friend why he did it, and the man explained, "I'm trying to bring happiness back into New York City!" Then he went on to explain, "Suppose the cab driver has 20 fares. That means because I was nice to him, he is now going to be much nicer to 20 other people. These persons, in turn, are going to be nice to clerks and waiters and employees and maybe even their own families."

Buchwald was skeptical. He asked, "Does it work?" The man said simply, "Well, nothing's lost if it doesn't". And they continued on down the street, the man being extra nice to people as they walked along. Finally Buchwald said, "You just winked at a very plain-looking woman". "I know" replied his friend, "and if she's a school teacher, her class will be in for a fantastic day!"

FOLLOW-UP

Now I tell that delightful story to hold up before you my first point. All of us are affected by signs from other people that they know us, or understand us and care about us.

At its deepest level, all of us need to know that we are loved. The basic truth is that we cannot live without love or at least we cannot live as whole, complete persons. An unwanted infant may receive the best care science can provide, but if he does not receive love, he languishes and dies. A child turned out on the street from a home where there is no love is soon in trouble. For some of us it is not that overtly dramatic, but I have talked to enough people to know that innumerable adults carry into their adult years and perpetuate in the lives of their children the fears, the anxieties and hostilities caused by the lack of love in their childhood years.

To be unwanted, to be forced to live but at the same time be unloved - can become so unsupportable that people strike out at persons all around them, seeking to compel life to give them what they perceive to be their true heritage - being loved and accepted by others. Or, they turn their anger inward and become self-destructive, trying to reshape the self that no one seems to love in such a way that it will somewhere find acceptance. We all need to know we are loved!

A friend told the story of a doctor in the midwest who examined a plain middle-aged woman who had been brought for help by her husband. There seemed to be no obvious thing wrong, but she had become dull and listless and lost most of her usual energy. The examination proved there were no physical causes and the doctor was stumped as to what to suggest, and he was about to tell the couple this when on impulse he walked over to the woman and gave her a big hug and kiss. Everybody was surprised, of course, but the doctor noticed that a brightness had come back to her eyes and vitality to her whole body. "Well" said the doctor to the husband, "Let me give you a prescription. Your wife needs to be hugged and kissed like this every day for the next month".

DON'T LET YOUR VOICE DROP

SMILE...COMMUNICATE...

WARMTH AND CONCERN.....