

"TRUE LOVE"

A Sermon By

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Park Avenue United Methodist Church
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INTRODUCTION

When Richard Nixon was running for President in 1968, you may recall that the War in Vietnam was at its peak. One of Nixon's television commercials showed a photograph of an American soldier in Vietnam with the word "LOVE" written on the front of his helmet. The image bothered some of Nixon's media men. They felt and they said:

"It tends to remind people of 'hippies'" And they didn't think it was the sort of thing that soldiers should be writing on their helmets.

However, about a week later a letter arrived from the mother of the soldier. And she said how thrilled she had been to see the photo of her son in Nixon's television commercial. She wondered if she could obtain a copy of the photograph and the letter was signed, "Mrs. William Love".

An interesting story. The soldier was not making a statement about his feelings at all. He was simply putting his last name on his helmet - "LOVE".

Which reminds me of something that humorist, Doc Blakely, said recently. He was poking good-natured fun at the Civilian Air Patrol - those courageous pilots who are so much help in locating missing aircraft. He said he worried about any group that has to have C-A-P initialed on their head gear. That young soldier with "LOVE" written on his helmet was not making a statement. He was simply stating his name. The initials "CAP" are describing a purpose.

DEVELOPMENT

Come with me now, back into history...2000 years. Jesus of Nazareth hangs on a cross. He wears no helmet, no cap - only a crown of thorns. Above His head is written neither His name nor His ultimate purpose, though there is a crude sign that reads, "King of the Jews". Yet...on that cross a statement is being made, for many in the world the most radical statement ever made about the nature of love. True love.

What is love? Love as we see it here is Jesus Christ giving His life for a torn, tattered, sinful, selfish world. This is love in its purest form. This is love without reservation, a love that asks or expects nothing in return.

And all other love pales in comparison. A parent loves his or her children, but expects respect and companionship in return. A husband loves his wife. He expects in return her fidelity, her emotional support, her physical intimacy. When Christ loves...when God loves, however, He loves without condition. That is what AGAPE LOVE is all about. Our text for today - John 3:16 - sums it up as well as it can ever be summed up:

"GOD SO LOVED THE WORLD...."

This is where we begin this morning. "God so loved the world..." Can you think of anything for which this world is hungrier than love?

A lonely man once programmed his computer to write him a love letter daily. He built a voice system that would speak lovingly to him, but he remained lonely. Manufactured, controlled love isn't love at all. Yet that's the only

love that many people ever experience. And how we long for something more.

I heard a story about a mountaineer from West Virginia who fell in love with the beautiful daughter of the town preacher. The gruff and tough man one evening looked deeply into the eyes of the preacher's daughter and said "I love you". It took more courage for him to say those simple words than he had ever had to muster for anything else he had ever done. Minutes passed in silence and then the preacher's daughter said, "I love you, too."

Well, this tough mountaineer said nothing except "Good night". Then he went home, got ready for bed and prayed,

"God, I ain't got nuthin' 'gainst nobody"

Many of us know that feeling. To love and to be loved...what joy that simple emotion brings into our lives. Then to realize that the very nature of God is love is almost more than you or I can really comprehend.

We're told that when early printers, using hand-set type, received an order to print a collection of Alfred Lord Tennyson's poems, they immediately ordered hundreds of extra letters L and V for their presses..for they knew Tennyson. He used the word "love" so often in his poetry that the average set of type could not possibly supply all the necessary letters.

It is with that same kind of "extravagant love" that God loves us. "God so loved the world..." But hold on, for there's more to come.

HE GAVE HIS ONLY BEGOTTEN SON

"God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son..." To love as God loves is to give...wonderfully, extravagantly, without holding anything back.

Remember the cynical hero of that classic motion picture, Casablanca, played by Humphrey Bogart, named Rick? Rick is suspicious and self-protecting. He has learned to survive by looking out only for himself. He is a stranger to tender feelings and generous gestures.

When a desperate man is arrested by the Gestapo in his bar, the man asks Rick, "Why didn't you help me?" And Rick sneers, "I don't stick my neck out for anyone."

Rick is living amidst the cruelty and inhumanity of World War II. Once he was hurt when he made the "mistake" of sticking his neck out for someone else. But now he is cynical, safe and successful. Something is missing from Rick's life, however, and he knows it. Circumstances have forced him to become tough and uncaring. When he looks at the Nazi officers stationed in Casablanca though - tough, powerful and unsentimental - he knows that he does not want to be like them.

Some people become like Rick. That is they become hardened by life. They become cynical and suspicious. They refuse to stick out their neck for anyone. Fortunately, God is not like that. Jesus was not like that. "God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son."

Pity the poor person who never is willing to stick out his or her neck

for another human being. The best feeling you'll ever have in your life is when you give of yourself for some one else!

Dr. Roy Angell tells a story about Carey Barker who use to play football for the Washington Redskins. One night after a game Carey Barker was walking in the snow to relax. It had been a tough afternoon. He came upon a lad sitting on a curb, crying. He asked, "What's the matter, son?" The boy said,

"My daddy sent me to the store to buy a loaf of bread and I've lost the dollar he gave me, and I'm afraid to go home."

Carey took the child into a store and purchased the bread for him. The lad departed, saying,

"Gee, mister...I wish you were my daddy!"

Carey Barker said he walked the streets that night trying to find another boy who needed a dollar and a dad.

There's nothing in life that will bring a good feeling into your life like giving to another. It's worth it to sometimes "stick your neck out" for another. But there's an important principle that we must recognize before we do and that is that before we are able to love we must be able to receive love. Let me give you an example...a powerful example, too.

Years ago there was a little girl in an institution who was almost like a wild beast. The workers at the institution had written this little girl off as hopeless. But an elderly nurse believed there was hope for the child, however and she felt she could communicate love and hope to this wild little creature. Daily the nurse visited the child whom they called "Little Annie", but for a long time Little Annie gave no indication that she was at all aware of the presence of this caring person. But this elderly nurse persisted and repeatedly brought some kindness and cookies to her and left them in the room. Soon the doctors began to notice a slight change in the little girl, for the better. And after a period of time, they moved Little Annie upstairs. Finally the day came when this seemingly "hopeless case" was released. And filled with compassion for others because of her experience in that institution, Little Annie, Anne Sullivan, wanted to "reach out" and help others.

Yes, it was Anne Sullivan who, in turn, played the crucial role in the life of Helen Keller. It was she who saw the great potential in this little blind girl, deaf and rebellious. She loved her, disciplined her, played, prayed, pushed and worked with her until Helen Keller became an inspiration to the entire world. It began with that older nurse, then Anne Sullivan, then Helen Keller, and finally every person who has ever been influenced by the example of Helen Keller.

I think that kind of love goes on forever. Before it began with that elderly nurse, though, we have to go all the way back to the beginning when God first loved His creation into being. We give love because we have received love. A child who has not known love will never give love. That is why the Bible tells us, "In this is love. Not that we loved God, but that He loved us and gave His Son to be the expiation for our sins."

Humankind could not love God or one another if we had not first been loved. There is no higher truth than that.

BELIEVE AND HAVE ETERNAL LIFE

"God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son that whosoever believes in Him should not perish, but have Eternal Life".

Faith is our response to God's love. Faith is not a response to the fear of God. Faith is not an intellectual acknowledgement of God. Faith is a response to God's love which has come to us in Christ. That is why the cross is such an important part of Christian faith. It is on the cross of Calvary that we see the love of God most clearly.

I often wonder....could it be that part of the spiritual, the emotional, and the moral malaise of our time can be explained by the fact that secular humanity has lost sight of the cross?

The October 1988 issue of Psychology Today pointed out that today's average 30 year old American is 10 times more likely to be depressed than his father was and 20 times more likely to be depressed than his grandfather was at the same stage of life. Could it be that in this secular society we really do not feel loved? Could it be that we feel that our lives lack significance? Could it be that we feel isolated and alone?

A book a few years ago dubbed this time in which we live as The Age of Anxiety. When we feel unloved, our lives are filled with anxiety. In the words of the psychologist, Erickson, it is because we have failed at the most elementary stage of our development - the ability to trust. How can you trust unless you know yourself to be loved? Thus we are anxious people whose anxieties keep us from being all God means for us to be.

One day in the autumn years of his life, the great composer Johannes Brahms reached a point in his life when his composing almost came to a halt. He started many things - serenades, part-songs and so on... - but nothing would seek to work out. Then he thought to himself,

"I am too old. I have worked long and diligently and have achieved enough. Here I have before me a carefree old age and can enjoy it in peace. I resolve to compose no more."

The interesting thing is that this cleared his mind. It relaxed his facilities so much that he was able to pick up with his composing again without any difficulty at all.

CLOSING

Many of us are a bundle of anieties. That is why we accomplish so little. We need to learn to relax in the knowledge that, yes - we are loved! Karl Barth, perhaps the greatest theologian of this century, was once asked what the most important theological insight was that he had wrestled with that he could pass on to future generations of believers. After a moment's reflection, this great Swiss - German theologian said:

"Jesus loves me, this I know. For the Bible tells me so!"

What a text, what a word to carry out of here with us:

"God so loved the world that He gave His only
begotten Son that whosoever believes in Him
should not perish, but have - eternal life!"

Do you really believe in Christ? Do you really have "it"? - a living consciousness of the presence of Christ? If you have it, then what are you worried about? Accept His love. And lay your deepest concerns at the foot of the cross? There's lots of room there. And remember that God made a statement on Calvary 2000 years ago. There were two signs that hung above the head of Jesus. The "unbelieving" world saw only one and it read, "King of the Jews". The "believing" eye, however, sees another,

"In this is love". "For God so loved the world
that He gave....His only begotten Son....that
whosoever believes in Him should not perish,
but have everlasting life." Amen!

PRAYER Open the eyes of our understanding, O God, as we try to interpret
Your word to us. Keep our minds clear, our imaginations alive,
and our hearts pure and humble, that we may turn to the great Book in which we
find Your word for us, knowing that in it You will somehow speak to each of
us and to our earthly condition.

Deepen our commitment to Christ as in these quiet moments before
You, we think of Him in the name of Him who as Love came among us, even
Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.

PASTORAL PRAYER: March 17, 1991

MAKE US sensitive to YOUR nearness and YOUR presence in these quiet moments, O God. Here, we would lift up our hearts unto YOU.

For courage, for faith.
For light, for strength.

SO OFTEN under the stress and tension of life in this great city, we find ourselves yielding to selfish ease and to mean ambition.

We become entangled so easily with the things of earth that we end up losing a sense of life's simplicity and life's nobility.

Help us to set our affections on things "above" that we may let go of those nagging doubts and gnawing fears that can cripple the soul and thus destroy a life.

Here, for a few moments this morning, we would see life from "higher ground".

FORGIVE US, LORD - each of us - for the unkind word that we may have spoken in anger this past week....for the hurt that we need-lessly may have caused...for the careless way we handle our precious human relationships.

We would not be weary in our well-doing. With Your help we would be faithful to the responsibilities that have been entrusted to us, and loyal to the commitments we have made.

Remind us in this hour of worship that we cannot fellowship with You if in our hearts we reject, or neglect our brother or sister who is in need.

We pray for the person who sits near us or next to us in the pew. We pray for those who have never really had a chance in life - the hurt, the homeless, the hungry, the helpless.

MAKE US TO SEE that love heals and that hate destroys,
that trust strengthens and distrust weakens.

FORTIFY our spirits,
ENLIGHTEN our reason,
ELEVATE our aims and desires,
LET OUR IDEALS pervade our thoughts and labors,

FILL OUR HEARTS with peace....that we may hear YOUR voice calling to us and thus be moved to build our lives on the foundation stones of Your law, Your way, Your truth. All this we ask in the spirit of Jesus Christ, Lord and Master and Saviour for so many...and in whom we all see life's highest hope and its deepest meaning.

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ANNOUNCEMENTS: Sunday, March 17, 1991

I. GREETING / VISITORS

- A. We take this opportunity to greet the visitors...pleased you're here and we invite you to join us downstairs for coffee following the service. Be free in the sharing... fill out a visitor card or sign one of the Guest Books. Come, worship with us on other Sundays...come, work with us in the outreach concerns of the church.
- B. Roots of this church are deep in the soil of this city... doing the Lord's work here since 1837...last Sunday we celebrated our 154th birthday. Founded on March 10, 1837. Minister in the name of Christ and it is in His loving spirit.
- C. Today's coffee hour is "in honor" of new friends of recent weeks and months...a good way to get to know us better... to catch something of the feel and spirit of this church on St. Patrick's Day. We do this once or twice across the year. And to our regular members I'd like to say: wear your name tags....remember the day you first came down for coffee and someone reached out and made you feel at home. Pass it on...and make a point of making at least two new friends.

II. PARISH CONCERNS

- A. Parish concerns are listed in the bulletin. Review them on your own noting the study groups and the meetings scheduled for this week: "Hounds" (Tuesday). Aldersgate Class (Wednesday). Administrative Council (Tuesday). Finance Committee (Thursday). Note, too, the Holy Week paragraph...
- B. Palm Sunday is a week from today...always a good crowd! Children in the service. Palm distributed. Those wishing to give to the fund for Easter Memorial Lilies are invited to use the special envelope in the pews. Deadline for lilies...
- C. Also, today we lift up here the special ONE GREAT HOUR OF SHARING appeal. Envelope is in the bulletin. It will be there again next Sunday. We usually respond with \$500 for this special outreach appeal.
- D. Last Sunday: good Sunday! Good turnout for church and meeting. Grateful for your response to Endowment appeal.

(over)

SEVERAL

- E. Let me acknowledge the presence of one or two (or more) 9th graders from Regis High School....with us today in connection with a course in Christian Theology...
Please convey our regards to Father Duffy...and if you'd like special credit on your visit today...linger with us downstairs and lend a hand with the Easter Baskets that we're doing for the Yorkville Common Pantry...it's called EASTER FUN...downstairs in the Russell Room from 12:30 to 1:30.

III. OFFERING

- A. Jesus said:

"It is more blessed to give than to receive". In this spirit....

IV. HYMN:

- A. Our middle hymn is on a bulletin insert...we sing it once a year on St. Patrick's Day...and near it...when you hear the melody, you'll know why...a good Irish melody...with some wonderful words.

REGIS HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS:

- | | |
|----------------------|---------------------|
| 1. Miguel Gonzalez | 7. Ismael Gonzalez. |
| 2. Tom Cillona | 8. Alexsis Asavado |
| 3. Matt Guiney | 9. Robert Acala |
| 4. Andrew Murray | 10. Mark Burger |
| 5. Dan Walsh | |
| 6. Adalberto Taveres | |

V. ADULT FELLOWSHIP

- A. 15 members of the AF...retreating this weekend...upstate in Kingswood....Ken Borgeson asked me Friday before they left to announce that next Sunday:
1. End of coffee hour. Open meeting of all interested in helping to map programs will meet in choir room...followed by a Brunch and Browse
 2. March 30th: Annual wine and cheese party...Jan Shroads will be hosting it in her new apartment.

LAY READER: CARL CONDRA

DATE: MARCH 10, 1991

BEFORE

"The Scripture Reading for today is taken from the
GOSPEL OF JOHN, Chapter 3, verses 14 - 21....

It is found on page 924 ~~and there is a second reading~~
~~which is from the Letter of Paul to the Ephesians, Chapter 2, verses~~
~~4 - 10, and found on page 1017...in the Bible in the pews.~~

(PAUSE FOR ABOUT 10 SECOND, CARL...WHILE THEY
LOCATE THE READINGS...AND THEN BEGIN...)

AFTER

"Thus endeth the reading taken from 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!"

INSTRUCTIONS

1. The minister will give you a nod when to come forward. He will make sure the Bible is open to the proper page for you.
2. After announcing the passage to be read, PAUSE...for about 15 seconds to give people the opportunity to locate the reading in the Bible in the pews.
3. Read slowly. Don't rush it. Keep your voice "up"... smile a bit if you can remember to. Be sure to project your voice out...the person on the last row has to be able to hear you.
4. Careful walking up....careful walking back down. Go slowly.