

SERMONS

FROM RIVERSIDE

"LOVE'S LAST WORD"

"In this the love of God was made manifest among us,
that God sent his only son into the world, so that we
might live through him." (I John 4:9)

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Years ago when Dwight L. Moody was building his tabernacle in the City of Chicago he directed that three words be set in flaming light across the front; "God is Love." Every Sunday in church schools around the world young voices are taught to sing:

"Praise Him, praise Him,
all ye little children,
God is love,
God is love."

But is God really love? Moody and the writer of that children's hymn had a common source in John the Apostle who said without equivocation, "God is love." Granted, John was a man of singular character and commitment, but if he were only guessing, then his hunch is worth no more than a scoundrel's.

Is God love? Does love reign at the heart of things? Is God benevolent or malevolent? Friend or foe? For us or against us? Caring or indifferent? Is God love, or is He more accurately described in that terse phrase of Edwin Muir, "God-three angry letters in a book!"

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In quest of answer we turn to the world of nature. But the answer given there is unsatisfactory and inconclusive. There are times when it would appear that nature answers "yes." When we see a cardinal perched on a deep green bush. Or the ocean on a quiet morning, its face a mirror flashing back the brilliance of the sun. Or a full moon flooding through the leafless trees of winter. Or a

familiar scene blanketed in freshly fallen snow. Or a flaming sunset that drapes the shoulders of the hills at end of day.

At other times we are not so sure. To call the out-of-doors a cathedral is to beg the question. What about the death knell of a tornado; a devastating drought; news of a storm at sea, and word of a ship sunk and lives lost to a watery death? Nature wears two faces. It answers "yes" and "no." William Blake spoke for many when he looked full-face upon the tiger and asked, "Did he who made the lamb make thee?"

Still in quest of answer we turn to history. But whether we look to the larger history of human-kind or the more modest history encased within the covers of our personal diaries, the answer remains inconclusive.

The history of the human family is a patch-work of light and shadows. Go back, for example, to the Middle Ages, turn to a landed feudal baron - over-fed, over-dressed, and blithely secure. Sidle up to him and ask, "Good sir, do you believe that God is love?" With a patronizing aire he turns and says, "My boy, of course, He's love."

But make your way on that same man's estate to some mean little shack where one of his serfs dwells with his family. Talk to a man whose life is an endless round of unrewarded toil, a man who is struggling for the minimum necessities for self and wife and children, a man who, when he thinks at all, sees himself as a mere pawn on the chess-board of Medieval politics. Ask him if God is love, and he will likely answer grimly, "Anything but love."

Visit Italy during the days of the good Saint Francis. Turn to some of his fellow-townsmen in Assisi and ask, "Friends, do you believe that God is love?" They will answer, "Of course, He's love. How else explain one so fine?" But return to Italy during the days of the ill-tempered Mussolini and ask whether God is love, and people will respond by asking, "If God be love, whence a man like that?"

Or return to that rather remarkable episode in our

history where little children, nine, ten, eleven and twelve years of age, determined that they would cross Europe to rescue the Holy Land from the Turks. In the face of such uprising idealism we are sure that God is love. But follow their crusades. See how in a matter of months their ranks were routed and many were captured or abused. Soon you will be asking, "Is He really love?"

The Hebrews were sure that God was love as they made their way across the Red Sea into freedom. They were not so sure in Assyria and Babylon later on.

Nor is the verdict any clearer when we zero in on that little inch of history that you and I have tracked. There are times, of course, when we are sure that we have been assisted by a kindly hand from above or beyond. Some good was conferred on us that we knew we did not deserve, or some evil was withheld that rightly should have come our way. But we will also acknowledge, if we are honest, that there are events in our lives, within the circle of our families, that might have gone better. Only God knows how many within the household of the faithful nurse the wounds of some hard blow, some frustrating denial.

We are really not so sure that God is love. On the question presses -- "Is God love or something less than love?" The answer is crucial to faith. Robert Browning was right when he said:

"For the loving worm within its clod
were diviner than a loveless
God amid his worlds."

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How can John say so confidently, "God is love?" How did he get that way? Where is the evidence for such an amazing statement? I feel we have a right to ask for evidence. There are some things that God might be that we would not have to know about. The old time theologians referred to such divine qualities as the "non-communicable attributes" of God. For example, God could be wise and

we would not have to know His wisdom. God could be holy and we would not have to know His holiness. But if God is love we would have to know. For it belongs to love to express and demonstrate and give evidence of itself. Has God's love been shown?

Stand by a thundering cataract like Niagara. Watch unending torrents cascade over a sheer drop of hundreds of feet, the foam whitening in the sun, the over-hanging mist rising like a halo, and a voice within you will say, "In this is made manifest the handiwork of God." But I have never doubted that God is skilled, have you?

Or stand in the presence of a lecture on the wonders of the human body. Listen to someone who knows describe the incredible interaction of part with part, the delicate sensitivity of the brain, the tiny but efficient mechanisms that we call the eyes, the ability of the system to digest and assimilate food. And a voice will say to you from within, "In this is made manifest the wisdom of God." But I have never doubted that God is wise.

Or stand in the path of an oncoming hurricane, as our family did some years ago on Shelter Island. Listen to the eerie whistle of angry winds, see once calm waters churned into indescribable fury, witness trees with the girth of centuries snapped at their roots like so many pieces of crisp celery, and a voice will say from within, "In this is made manifest the power of God." But I have never doubted that God is powerful.

Is there a place where a man can look to see God's love displayed? John says there is; "In this the love of God was made manifest among us, that God sent his only son into the world, so that we might live through him." (I John 4:9) As he writes he points to one event - God's incarnation in Jesus Christ, an event that began with Bethlehem and culminated on a hill outside the City of Jerusalem.

The verb to "manifest" is in the perfect tense, indicating a finality about the evidence for love given in the son. The Christian case for the love of God does not rest on some

weak analogy from nature, or on selective references from history at large. The Christian case for the love of God rises from His gift to us in Jesus Christ. We see His love here, or we do not see it anywhere.

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There are a few observations that I should like to make about this astounding statement of St. John. It is important that we notice that God's love was "made manifest" in Jesus Christ. The author does not say that God's love began with Jesus Christ. God doesn't change in His attitude toward you or me or the world - one time indifferent, now caring, once hostile, now friendly. There are people in the Christian church who believe that God was never loving until Jesus came, and that somehow when the son came God repented him of an earlier nastiness and became kindly disposed toward men. This is an insult to our Jewish friends and the faith in which they stand. And it is unworthy of our tradition. God's love did not originate in Jesus Christ, it was declared, revealed, disclosed, made manifest in Jesus Christ. Jesus did not come to make God loving, but because God did, does, and always will love.

Moreover, this is "Love's Last Word." No more can be given: No more should be expected. This is what the writer of Hebrews was pointing to when in the very beginning of his letter he said: "In many and various ways God spoke of old to our fathers by the prophets; but in these last days he has spoken to us by a son. . ." (Hebrews 1:1, 2a NEB) A son whom Scripture refers to as "monogeneis" the only begotten. God has no more, no other and no better.

This, then, becomes the definitive disclosure of God's character. That word definitive is frequently used in the world of book reviewing. The definitive work in any field is the work by which all other works are measured. I would suppose that Sandburg's Life of Abraham Lincoln is definitive, that Bulfinch's Mythology is still definitive, that Gibbon's Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire is still definitive. In somewhat the same sense what God has done in His son becomes the definitive characterization of God.

"What more can He say, than to you He has said?"

Yet blind and stumbling that we are, we keep asking for further proof. But His answer is always the same - a bright star in a Syrian sky, a cross out yonder on a hill, and an empty tomb in Joseph's garden. "In this the love of God was made manifest among us."

This is where we begin to know God. The Apostles' Creed, probably the oldest of our major Creeds, does not begin here. It begins "I believe in God the father almighty," and goes on to "Jesus Christ His only son our Lord" and then to the "Holy Spirit." John Calvin in his Institutes followed the arrangements of the Apostles' Creed. However proper this may be to formal theology, I am convinced that when we experience God we experience Him not along the lines of the Apostles' Creed, but rather in the order of the Apostolic benediction; "the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, the communion and fellowship of the Holy Spirit."

It is in the light of this disclosing act of God that we must learn to read our providence. Sooner or later time and circumstance will drive us toward the temptation of despair - some illness, some disappointment that clings, the untimely death of one whom we held dear. Always in such circumstance we are faced with two alternatives. Either we will try to see our circumstance in the light of God, or we will try to define God in the light of that circumstance. To define God in the light of such a circumstance is to invite disaster for our faith. This is so because whatever that circumstance might be it is sure to be crowded with variables and ambiguities.

Take, for instance, the premature death of one whom we have loved through cancer. Do we understand God from that circumstance, or do we try to understand that circumstance in the light of what we know God to be in Christ. So many variables are at work in such a tragedy. Was there an inherited susceptibility to the disease? Was there, wittingly or unwittingly, a consistent violation of the laws of health? Was there something in the total general environ-

ment that pre-disposed this person to become a victim?"

It is always dangerous business to fashion our understanding of God from dark circumstance of that kind. Better to go from the unmistakably clear to the vague and unsure. This is what Paul did in his monumental eighth chapter of the Roman letter. Hear him as he climaxes that chapter in these words: "For I am convinced that there is nothing in death or life, in the realm of spirits or superhuman powers, in the world as it is or the world as it shall be, in the forces of the universe, in heights or depths, nothing in all creation that can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord." (Romans 8:38-39 NEB)

We were speaking a moment ago about definitive literature. Surely the definitive work on Samuel Johnson is the work of his biographer, James Boswell. Apparently Boswell was a man who needed frequent reassurance from his idol, that Johnson really cared. At one point he badgered Johnson to tell him again that he cared for him. Johnson replied in this way: "My regard for you is greater almost than I have words to express, but I do not choose to be always repeating it. Write it down in the first leaf of your pocketbook, and never doubt of it again." 1

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It's one thing to have a cold for a little while, but if that cold hangs on for long it could be serious. It's one thing to despair of the love of God for a season. We all do. But if that despair becomes a settled view of life, then we had better look again to where John pointed when he said: "In this the love of God was made manifest among us, that God sent his only son into the world, so that we might live through him." Write it down in the first leaf of your notebook, whoever you may be, and never doubt it again - that God loves you!

CLOSING PRAYER

Lord, in a world where we are dwarfed by
the sheer immensity of the universe;
In a society that knows us more often by
number than by name;
In a day when we find it hard to affirm our
own worth;
Help us to believe with Thy saints in every
age that Thou art love.
To that love we commit our past,
our present and our future,
And in this love we pray.
Through Jesus Christ our Lord.
Amen.

FOOTNOTES:

1. Stephen, Leslie, Samuel Johnson, p. 132,
Haprer & Row, N. Y.

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