



WAYS WE EXPERIENCE GOD: HOLY LOVE

John 3:16; Malachi 3:2b-4

For God so loved the world...

September 15, 2019

Dr. Thomas E. Evans

This week we conclude our seven-part series on the Ways in Which We Experience God. Once again, I want to thank all the focus group participants throughout the country who offered their honest thoughts that helped shape this series. In keeping with Paul's assessment in 1 Corinthians 13 (faith, hope and love abide these three...) we have kept the greatest and the best for last...

The consistent theme
through everyone's experience,
the thread that was woven
into all their stories,
was an overpowering sense
of God's unconditional acceptance
and overwhelming LOVE.

And so I have defined this experience as follows:

Holy Love: A sense of unconditional acceptance by God, for others and for yourself and a feeling of profound care and devotion.

The scriptures are various but the central one is found in John 3:16-17 and we only need a few words to convey so much,

God SO loved the WORLD.

Like many of you I have been familiar with this verse since I was a child, but parts of it gained deeper meaning during my sabbatical... The world. God loves the world. God loves everyone.

I knew God so loved the world,
but when you see it,
in travels through the country
and around the world,
and meet people;
just people;
who live and die,
who eat and breath,
who ache and hope,
who share

the deepest yearnings of their heart
and those moments in which they knew
the blessed assurance
of divine devotion
affection and tenderness...

...When you see it,
you realize God has
so much more going on,
in your street,
your neighborhood,
your town,
the state,
the country,
AND THE PLANET!
than you can ever imagine.

And, in an amazing way, it assures you of God's love and care for your own situation and needs.

If God is paying so much attention
to all the different corners of the world,
surely God is doing the same for you.
As you hear these stories,
you hear God's passionate, hungry,
yearning, aching love for them.

And people can experience this care in even the briefest of encounters.

During one church gathering, people were sharing their stories. After a man shared a story of failure and loss, another man came to him and simply said, "I've been right there. In that same hard place." To someone witnessing that event, it felt like those were words from God, an expression of God's sympathy and God's parental care, not simply that specific man's kindness. And these stories came from every kind person in any moment.

The world teaches us
to love certain people,
those who look like us

and act like us,
who share our same beliefs,
but in these stories,
it became O so clear!
God makes no such choices!
Jesus said,
*If you love those who love you
of what credit is that?
Do not even the hypocrites do the same?!*

The whole world Jesus speaks of is not a metaphor or a mere description. If God sees no need to pick and choose, then neither should I.

But even more wonderfully, in a way that only God could accomplish, God's love is not only universal, covering the whole planet, but we also find it very personal and intimate. Jesus calls his disciples, friends. And he teaches us to pray to God as a heavenly parent.

But we have put up barriers to knowing this type of love. God uses others to convey it, yet we are afraid of making ourselves vulnerable because we are afraid of being judged and dismissed.

When we are willing to peel back the layers of defense, we will know the Lord's tender and passionate love for us. This became clear to me in one person's story. He described a church mission trip,

At the end of the trip we gather as a group and everybody shares. It is voluntary but almost everyone does...

At this moment, his voice broke. He paused to compose himself and, as he continued, you could hear in his voice and see in his eyes that it is a deep, intimate moment of speaking about something very personal, very profound, very loving, and very sacred:

You pick someone in the group and use this phrase, 'Jesus is the light of the world and I see that light in you'....and you say to them how you saw God working in them that week. It is a highlight of [my] spiritual life.

I heard dozens of these stories everywhere I went. I realized you and I have these powerful

feelings of love for a moment and they overwhelm us. But God's love *is always* on full throttle.

The Bible uses the word "steadfast" to describe this love. And it is a tireless, unrelenting love that does not wax and wane with the Lord's mood or our misdeeds. It is most clearly seen in God's chosen people, the Jews. Throughout the Old Testament, the Israelites fall away from worshipping the Lord, abuse the poor, and fail the commandments. It infuriates and frustrates God. But God does not abandon them.

God will never abandon them.

And so the Psalmist gives praise, "O give thanks to the God of heaven, for his steadfast love endures forever." (Psalm 136:26)

Some saw this steadfastness through observing others. For one person it happened at Children's Time. As she watched the children come forward, she noticed a parent that came forward to sit close, "to make sure he's okay". Seeing the parent's care reminded her of God's unwavering care. God gives us freedom to fully live in the world, but God is always close at hand, ready to step in.

As I listened to these stories, it led my mind to wander in an unexpected direction. Cake!

Last Fall, I was visiting my mother and she pulled out a magazine. It had this picture of a cake recipe she wanted me to bake. I had not baked much in years but, after glancing at it, my mouth was watering and I was game!

The layered buttercream frosting was exciting!
The tiered, fudge cake was enticing!
And the gooey, creamy, chocolatey ganache icing was intoxicating!
It was sugar, cream, and chocolate, injected with a jillion megawatts of electric delight!!

As people described God's love, it seemed that they had experienced this same extravagant, overabundance of joy. Like the parable of the Prodigal Son, in which the father throws a blowout

party for his son that has returned. "There is more joy in heaven over one sinner that repents!"

But there is another side to this love of God. That goes beyond moments of joy and instances of blessings. Like any good parent, God not only provides the comfort but the discipline and sacrifice necessary.

Thus, Jesus continues his words, *God so loved the world... that he gave his only begotten Son.* Steadfast love that will not let go is a divine joy and burden.

Love can make us miserable.
We worry about our parents,
our uncle,
our friend.
The Bible tells us
that God's love was so painful
that it cut the divine heart.

For to love someone is to be in pain when they
are in pain.
To love someone is to be hungry when they are
hungry,
to be sad when they are sad.
God's love must be excruciatingly painful,
for I know how painful it can sometimes be
to love my two children.
But Jesus knows that kind of love
for every person
and he felt it all
when God gave him,
the only begotten Son,
to the cross.
Jesus felt it all for us.

There was one focus group that paid special emphasis to this aspect of God's love. They objected to the incessant talk of God's unconditional love because, to them, it sounded like God did not care about how we lived, treated others, or observed God's laws. With the endless judgements in our world and the many personal failures people have experienced, there is an urgent need for unconditional love. As Paul said, *love never ends*. Sometimes this is confused with

God's love being soft or easy like an overly-permissive parent.

In fact, most of the time, God's love is less like the *Leave it to Beaver* father and more like a relentless mother (did any of you have one of those?) who won't leave us alone in the corner to be less that she knows we are capable of.

As Micah explains,
For he is like a refiner's fire, he will sit as a refiner and purifier of silver, and he will purify the descendants of Levi and refine them like gold and silver, until they present offerings to the Lord in righteousness.

In other words, God is not going to give up on us, and God is going to keep working on us, until God has refined all the dross from our souls, and it realizes its full, shining purity.

Hebrews uses the parent metaphor to convey the same message,

My child do not regard lightly the discipline of the Lord, or lose heart when you are punished by him; for the Lord disciplines those whom he loves, and chastises every child whom he accepts.

One woman I interviewed explained this very well,

From the beginning I was taught to expect that life would be hard. And that at times God would demand almost more from us than we think we can give. I knew of God's profound love in Christ but also that God does most of the shaping and teaching of His disciples through trials...

She spoke of the importance of teaching a resilient faith:

We must not always send the message that God is Santa Claus showering us with goodies and presents all the time.

She went on to tell the story of her oldest daughter.

She was born with special needs.

*That night, the very night she was born,
I was holding her;*

*I remember that feeling, what was happening.
and I felt a voice that was clear
"I will take care of her; it is going to be okay."*

*Over the years it did not seem okay,
but I always tried to do the right thing.
However, whether a Sunday school teacher
or someone at school,
wonderful people turned up in my life...
And for 24 years, she was wonderful, chatty and
happy...*

*But little things cropped up;
they did not know what it is;
her kidney and heart...
she was diagnosed at 24 with a rare disease...
She died suddenly at 25.*

I could tell by the way she described the moment. Even in her daughter's death, she found a moment of knowing God's grace. I was hesitant but desperate to understand, and so I asked her to explain:

*We never had to tell her there was nothing we
could do for her; {God took her before that
happened) it gave me a lot of strength...*

Finally, she said,

*I learned so much from her...I am committed to
using my experience to help others; I feel committed
to the idea... what is the point if I don't use it for
something good. Teaching a resilient faith rooted in
scripture is critical to helping people know God's
grace in trials...*

I could tell, like our Lord on the cross, that her wounds were deep, but I could also tell she knew the Love that will not let me go... Never, ever, ever. Amen.