

## 1 Sermon, March 17, 2013

Texts: Romans 5:1-11, John 3:11-21

Title: "Why Christianity is Odd: The Love of God"

1. No Joke
2. Love is a universal virtue
3. God loving us is far from a universal concept
4. What is this love? How can we express it in human terms?
5. God is like that

### 1. No Joke

There was a recent issue of the magazine Christian Century, which published the sayings of authors who tried to tell the gospel in seven words or less. Kathleen Norris wrote: "God is Love. This is no joke."

She writes further:

Gospel love brings us to our senses. The love epitomized in Jesus Christ is serious and demanding, merciful and not judgmental. It is life-giving and self-sacrificing. It is love that sees and tells the truth, whatever the cost. In Jesus we find the love of God.

### 2. Love is a universal virtue

Love. It's something we admire in others. All the major religions praise love when it is compassion between human beings.

But that's not the case when we talk about the love of *God*.

### 3. God loving us is far from a universal concept

We may think that everyone believe that God loves us.

But, no, it is a foreign concept to the world's other major religions.

Hinduism is about fitting into the grand scheme of the universe.

Buddhism is about letting go of attachments.

Islam focuses much more on God's greatness than God's love. There is much talk of God's mercy in the Koran, but not much about the kind of love that we know in Jesus.

Of the other world religions, Judaism, Sikhism and the Bahai Faith seem to come the closest to Christianity's emphasis on the love of God. But these do not comprise a large percentage of world population.

So, for most of the world, God is *not* primarily love.

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### 4. What is this love? How can we express it in human terms?

For Christians, God *is* love. I John 4 tells us:

"Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God; everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love. God's love was revealed among us in this way: God sent his only Son into the world so that we might live through him." 1 John 4:7-9, NRSV.

Yes, God loves us. But how does God love us?  
Is it a sentimental and sweet kind of love?

Romans 5 says:

God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us.

Sounds like a syrupy sweet love. Like we're Aunt Jemima bottles that can have sweetness poured into us.

But that's not really the tone of the whole passage, which also says:

But God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us.

The love God has for us is actually a sacrificial love. It is a love of action. It defies logic, but neither is it just a feeling.

The pouring out is more like a sacrificial offering; like a bushel of wheat offered at the altar, like a lamb sacrificed on the eve of Passover so that families can remember how God led them to freedom.

Most religions praise that kind of sacrificial love when it is shown by humans. But few religions other than Christianity say that *God* is willing to show sacrificial love.

Most of us are familiar with John 3:16-17:

"For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life. "Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him." John 3:16-17, NRSV.

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But what does that mean? Does God truly love the whole world – almost seven billion people, all life on the planet, even the planet itself? Is every little cockroach important to God?

Well, John 3 tells us that God loves the world in order to save it. It is a sacrificing, rescuing kind of love, one that spends itself in order to rescue the beloved.

And Romans tells us that God's saves us through reconciliation. God saves us by renewing that deep connection between us and God, renewing that connection between us. Christ's death is love because it transforms us from enemies into friends.

So, get this picture of the love God has for us. It's like what Jesus said: This is the God who will search high and low for us when we are lost and have wandered off. Ours is the God who runs out to meet us, the prodigal daughters and sons, welcoming us home. And this is a God who forgives us seventy times seventy times seven times.

What's your picture of selfless, sacrificial, rescuing love?  
Is it the soldier who goes back into battle to rescue his buddy?  
Is it giving a kidney to a stranger?  
Is it teaching children with love in a public school?  
Is it sitting by the bed of someone who is dying?  
Is it giving baths in nursing homes to the ones who cannot bathe themselves?

All of these represent selfless, sacrificial, rescuing love. The last image is the one that moves me the most. Imagine bathing a non-related person in a way that honors them, in a way that preserves their dignity as much as possible. Imagine bathing someone who has a disease that makes their body stiff, maybe they need to be fed by a tube through the stomach, and maybe they have a colostomy bag. Maybe they can't even talk to say thank you, and just look at you woodenly. You can imagine what would make you most uncomfortable in that kind of situation.

Now think of God, who knows us through and through – all our spiritual ugliness – and loves us anyway, treating us with dignity and gently heals us, gently instructs us, gently cleanses us so that we are renewed and regenerated.

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Christ's death was that kind of an action – an action of love for the unlovable.

#### 5. God is like that

It's something we can't fully understand. We can only compare it to things in our own experience.

Since we know what it is like to be loved by a human being, we know that it is like that to be loved by God.

God listens to us.

God expresses love through little things day by day – like crocuses pushing through the snow and children saying their first words, like a touch of a friend.

God gives us gifts – like Holy Communion and Scripture and Baptism.

God gets down to our level through Christ's own humanity.

And God helps us make friends – that's what it means when we say that God in Christ was reconciling the world to himself.

God's love is personal, like that of the shepherd who leaves the 99 sheep in the field and goes after the one who is lost.

This is what God's love is like: sacrificial, inclusive, rescuing. God listens, does little things for us constantly, gives us gifts, gets down to our level, and reconciles us to others.

Let me end with a parable:

Jesus said, "what woman having ten silver coins, if she loses one of them, does not light a lamp, sweep the house, and search carefully until she finds it? When she has found it, she calls together her friends and neighbors, saying, 'Rejoice with me, for I have found the coin that I had lost.' Just so, I tell you, there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents."

Luke 15:8-10, NRSV.

Amen.

"Therefore, since we are justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have obtained access to this grace in which we stand; and we boast in our hope of sharing the glory of God. And not only that, but we also boast in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us, because God's

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love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us. For while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly. Indeed, rarely will anyone die for a righteous person—though perhaps for a good person someone might actually dare to die. But God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us. Much more surely then, now that we have been justified by his blood, will we be saved through him from the wrath of God. For if while we were enemies, we were reconciled to God through the death of his Son, much more surely, having been reconciled, will we be saved by his life. But more than that, we even boast in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received reconciliation.” Romans 5:1-11, NRSV.

“Very truly, I tell you, we speak of what we know and testify to what we have seen; yet you do not receive our testimony. If I have told you about earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you about heavenly things? No one has ascended into heaven except the one who descended from heaven, the Son of Man. And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life. “For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life. “Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him. Those who believe in him are not condemned; but those who do not believe are condemned already, because they have not believed in the name of the only Son of God. And this is the judgment, that the light has come into the world, and people loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil. For all who do evil hate the light and do not come to the light, so that their deeds may not be exposed. But those who do what is true come to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that their deeds have been done in God.” John 3:11-21, NRSV.