

## God So Loves the World

Hosea 11:1-9; John 3:16-17

First Presbyterian Church, Martinsville, Indiana

March 22, 2009

If someone were to ask you, What is the gospel? What is this good news that Christians are always talking about? how would you answer? A pretty basic question for Christian faith! Some years ago at a Conference on Theological Diversity at Montreat, North Carolina, I was part of a small group discussion in which everyone was asked to answer this question--in five minutes or less! What is the gospel?

This morning I want to share with you, and elaborate on, my answer to this question. (It will take me more than five minutes.) The answer I gave then, and give now, is this: "God so loves the world."

John 3:16 has often been described as the gospel in miniature. You've seen it on signs held up by people in the crowd at big sporting events: John 3:16. "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." Although this verse says a lot about the gospel, I have long found that it is not altogether satisfactory. One of the reasons is that it is too limiting, too narrow in its scope. To begin with, the gospel needs to be understood in the present tense as well as the past: God not only loved the world in the Son, God still loves the world today. The gospel is not just "once upon a time," or even "once and for all." God's love is a permanent, enduring, and continuing feature of God's relationship toward the world.

This affirmation of God's love for the world means to me, first of all, as the philosopher William James put it, that the universe is ultimately friendly. God does not have it "in" for us or the world. Indeed, God is kindly disposed toward all creation. God does not intend evil toward any part of the cosmos. In fact, the Greek word for world in the Gospel of John is 'kosmos.' It means the universe. It also has the connotation of created order, as distinguished from chaos. The world that God loves is not the chaotic disorder that we sometimes perceive within and about us, but the world as God has created and is creating it to be.

Does it seem obvious that God must love the world? It has not always been so. Often God's love for the world has seemed in doubt. Sometimes the world has even seemed antithetical to God. The Greek philosopher Plato, has one of his characters in *The Republic* declare, "God, if good, is not the author of all things, but of a few things only, and not of most things that occur to humankind" [Book II]. As Plato observed, much of what exists or transpires in the world hardly seems good, and therefore would seem to be either not God's doing, or evidence that God is not good. Plato was hardly alone in perceiving this dilemma of reconciling God's goodness with a world that is not so good.

One of the competing religious worldviews at the time Christianity was born was gnosticism, a

constellation of myths and ideas including the belief that the created world was evil. The true God was not responsible for creation. In the gnostic view, all materiality was the work of some sort of lesser god, not the real God who would save us from this world. For the gnostics, whose influence found its way into Christianity, divine salvation meant escape from the physical world. The spiritual soul or being would be delivered from the physical body and from the corruptions of all physical matter.

Long before Plato or the gnostics came along, however, the ancient Hebrews must have wondered about God's disposition toward the creation. The Genesis story of Noah and the great flood begins with a description of the wickedness of humankind and includes this statement from Yahweh God: "I will blot out from the earth the human beings I have created--people together with animals and creeping things and birds of the air, for I am sorry that I have made them" [Gen. 6:7]. Things had not turned out as God had intended. The human creature, in particular, had turned away from God.

As the story of Noah and the flood unfolds, however, we see that it is a reaffirmation of God's commitment to the creation. God preserves Noah and his family as a way of preserving the creatures of earth. The flood becomes a way of saving the world. God covenants with Noah never to bring such destruction again. God sets a rainbow in the sky.

But there is pathos in this story. God has been grieved, deeply pained, by the corruption of life on earth. How can God possibly love a world marked by corruption and filled with violence? God's love for the world is not blind! Not everything that has become part of the world meets with God's indiscriminate acceptance. Evil stands in opposition to God's created order.

From a human perspective, the story of the flood may be a way of saying that God is capable of loving an imperfect world. It may also be a way of saying that even devastating natural disaster is not a sign of God's rejection of the world. The world, with all its corruptions, remains within the compass of God's commitment and care. God's ultimate purpose is for the sake of the creation.

The prophet Hosea makes a strikingly similar affirmation with respect to God's people. They also have become corrupted. They also are experiencing destruction. "When Israel was a child, I loved him," says God, "and out of Egypt I called my son." This is how it was in the beginning, when God delivered the Hebrews from their bondage. God taught them to walk, led them with cords of human kindness, with bands of love. "I was to them like those who lift infants to their cheeks," says God. "I bent down to them and fed them."

But God's children turned away, and will suffer the consequences. They shall be devastated in war, and become subject to foreign powers. And yet God resolves not to abandon them altogether. "How can I give you up, Ephraim? How can I hand you over, O Israel?" laments God. "My heart recoils within me; my compassion grows warm and tender. I will not execute my fierce anger; I will not again destroy Ephraim; . . . I will return them to their homes," God says.

Whatever disaster befalls them, whatever judgment God renders upon them, Hosea affirms that God's compassion will prevail. God's fundamental disposition toward the people is not wrath but love. God's ultimate intention is to save, not to destroy.

The God of Hebrew and Christian faith is persistent in love. God so loves the world that, in spite of everything that runs contrary to the divine purpose, God will not give up on us. God does not will that any should perish [II Peter 3:9].

In saying that God so *loves* the world, I mean that there is constancy and contemporaneity in God's love. This is because love is not just an act of God, it is definitive of the being of God. As I John puts it, "God is love" [4:8, 16]. There is nothing you or I can do to turn off God's love.

I also believe that God is continually making new overtures toward us. For us Christians, the most definitive of these overtures was in Jesus of Nazareth. In Jesus we have seen in the most personal terms the nature and love of God. And we have seen the goodness that God intends for us to embody in our relationships with one another. What does it mean, humanly speaking, to say that God loves you or me? Behold the love of Jesus for all sorts and conditions of humankind. How far is God willing to go in extending this love? Behold the life and death of Jesus. Jesus Christ is both the definitive expression of God's love for us and the most complete manifestation of what it means for us to live in faithfulness to the divine purpose, in community with others, before God, and in the world.

One of the most important dimensions of the love of God in Jesus Christ is reconciliation. Someone else in our small group at Montreat defined the gospel in those words of Paul to the church at Corinth: "God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself" . . . and giving us the ministry of reconciliation [II Cor. 5:19, 18]. The reconciliation of the world requires the overcoming of violence and disorder, the transformation of enmity and strife. There can be no reconciliation without forgiveness.

I spent my first four years after divinity school as pastor of a church in a small town in southern West Virginia. One of the things I discovered in that culture was a tendency to bear grudges, a kind of refusal to forgive. My fellow pastors had similar observations. There was a common saying that the only way you could overcome those who might oppose you was to outlast them and outlive them. You had to bury them! People were just not very likely to forgive and move on. I could then understand the legendary feuding of the Hatfields and McCoys. Without forgiveness, people are condemned to go on fighting and killing and dying with no end in sight.

John says that "God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world might be saved through him." God is not in the business of condemnation. You know, there are lots of people who have tried to turn Christianity into a religion of condemnation. Basically, they want God to send all their enemies to hell. Those who use the name of Jesus Christ in condemnation of the world are taking it in vain. The ministry of Jesus Christ is a ministry of forgiveness. We can say all we want about God's forgiveness of our sins in Jesus Christ, but

unless we practice forgiveness toward others God's forgiveness will be of little account in our lives. In the Lord's Prayer, Jesus teaches his disciples to pray, "Forgive us our debts *as we forgive our debtors.*" If we do not forgive, we can hardly expect to be forgiven.

Now, it's important to note that forgiveness is not a warm fuzzy feeling, nor is it a matter of looking the other way. Theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer warned against superficial notions of forgiveness. He called them cheap grace. Sometimes people get the idea that all this talk in Christianity about love and forgiveness is so much soft-headedness. The world is not a friendly place, and we had better be properly armed, and ready to deal with it at its worst.

The truth is, a gospel of love can be quite effective in communicating God's judgment upon hate. If you make it clear what love is all about, then people who are not very loving will get uncomfortable hearing that God is love. And if you make it clear what forgiveness entails, then those who harbor major grudges against their neighbors and the world will find the message of forgiveness to be a serious judgment upon them.

The word of God's love is in fact a judgment upon everything in the world that is not characterized by love. The word of forgiveness recognizes in fact that there are significant faults and injuries that need to be forgiven. There is nothing soft about God's judgment upon what transpires in the world.

If God is God, and God is love . . . then every work of fear, and every work of hate, and every work of jealousy, and every work of greed, and every work of pride is sure to fail.

If God is God, and God is love . . . then these are perilous times for any people or group or nation that trades on fear or terror or destructive power.

If God is God, and God is love . . . then humble scoundrels and other sinners will receive God's blessing before the righteous proud.

The only respect in which God's judgment may seem soft is this: God judges us and the world, not in order to condemn us because of our sin, but in order to save us from that sin.

In the eighth chapter of Romans the apostle Paul makes two assertions that are integral to my understanding of the gospel. They appear in the first and the last verses. Both of them have to do with our status "in Christ Jesus." Paul begins this chapter with the assurance, "There is . . . now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus." He ends the chapter with the ringing affirmation that nothing "in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord." This brings us to one of the most fundamental questions of Christian theology. Were it not for Christ Jesus, how would we stand before God?

One answer that has been given is this: We would stand condemned by God, and we would be permanently separated from the love of God. **I believe that answer to be utterly at odds with**

**the gospel.** What is at stake in our being "in Christ Jesus" is not God's disposition toward us, but our disposition toward God. Paul did not say to the Corinthians that God was "in Christ" reconciling *himself* to the world, rather that God was "in Christ" reconciling *the world* to himself." For us to be "in Christ Jesus" is to come to know God as One who loves us, and not as One who might condemn us. It is to be free from the fear of condemnation by God. It is to realize and recognize that God is love. And to be "in Christ Jesus" is to become open and available to God's love, and not to shut ourselves off from the resources of divine mercy and the energies of divine grace.

Someone in my small group at Montreat asked me, "From what are we saved?" My answer was that we are saved from perishing. As John says, God gave the Son so that we "may not perish". I believe that to be saved also means to be rescued from the disorder that infects God's good creation.

Now, there is a sense in which everything in the world perishes [cf. Hebrews 1:11]. That is why the ancient gnostics wanted little to do with the world. We all know that moth and rust consume, everything living dies. To be saved from perishing is not to be saved from our own mortality. It is to be saved from the disorder and destruction of our own shortcomings and sin. It is to be saved from lives of meaningless insignificance. It is to be saved from the sense of futility in labors that will not endure. It is to be saved from the relentless march of time that will eventually undo all our human endeavors. It is also to be saved from the degradations of violence and hatred and fear, from the disorder that afflicts every human society where the weak are exploited by the powerful, and the rich have unjust advantage over the poor. It is to be saved from all evil that would pervert and destroy whatever good our human powers might enable us to accomplish before we perish.

To be saved from perishing is to be given a part in that which will endure. John says that God gave the Son so that we "may not perish but have eternal life." John understands this "eternal life" not just as future prospect but as already present possibility. Eternal life is a quality of life that we can now experience and enjoy in communion with God.

To me, the life that we are given in communion with God is one that will endure. It will endure insofar as we share in the purpose and work of God. It will endure insofar as we are engaged in the ministry of reconciliation. It will endure insofar as we are doing all those things that may be characterized as works of love. It will endure, because it is of God.

What is the gospel? To me it is this: God so loves the world that we are continually invited to live in communion with God, with one another, and with the divinely ordered creation. Even now, despite all the degradations and evils within our world, it is possible to have a part of enduring significance in God's on-going creation and redemption of the world. So we may experience and share the joy and the work of our Creator. So may we glorify God and enjoy God forever. AMEN.

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