



Westminster Presbyterian Church

The Rev. Dr. Richard Baker

June 14, 2019 Sermon

The Love - and the Tears - of Heaven

Scripture Lessons: I John 4:8-12, I Corinthians 13:4-13

To tell the truth, I have no real notion of what eternal life will be like, for the simple reason that I know of no sensible experience to which it can be related. . . . In heaven, St. Paul assures us, "the peace of God surpasses all understanding." Certainly, it surpasses ours. . . . not even St. Paul for all his greatness, could say more than this: "For now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then we will see face to face."

We are to be sharers of His peace . . . we are to receive within ourselves and in our relations to one another and to God, a supreme degree of peace. Face-to-face—that is how the holy angels already see God, and how we too shall come to see God. That is when God will be "all in all."—Augustine, *The City of God*, Book 22, Chapter 29

First Scripture Lesson

We teachers have our shticks.

"Shtick": It's a Yiddish word, s-h-t-i-c-k, and it means a piece or a bit, sometimes even a gimmick—associated with, frequently said or used by, a person. For teachers it can be a favorite saying or phrase, a memory prompt, a verbal tic a gesture or a characteristic way of presenting something. "The Holy Spirit tends to favor those who do their homework," there that's one of my shticks.

Here's another one I use when we're reading the bible in a Sunday School class, especially when it's a familiar passage: I have the class cover the passage with their hands, and then at a certain point—I stop and say, "Pretend you don't know this passage, what would you guess, what would you expect to come next?" It's a good way to hear a familiar passage with new ears. So try it with me on our First Scripture Lesson, from the New Testament, First John 4: 8-12. Listen now for God's Word:

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. In this is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins. Beloved, since God loved us so much—Stop there.

Pretend you don't know this passage, what would you guess, what would you expect to come next?" Beloved Since God loved us so much —Maybe you'd expect something like, "so we ought to love God." But instead we get this: we also ought to love one another.

And the verse continues in an even more unexpected way:

No one has ever seen God; if we love one another, *God lives in us, and his love is perfected in us.*

I'll come back to this verse at the end of the sermon.

Second Scripture Lesson

Our second Scripture Lesson—I Corinthians 13—also about love, is also a familiar one. So let's try my shtick again. Listen for God's Word:

Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth. It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.

Love never ends.

But as for prophecies, they will come to an end; as for tongues, they will cease; as for knowledge, it will come to an end. For we know only in part, and we prophesy only in part; but when the complete comes, the partial will come to an end. When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child; when I became an adult, I put an end to childish ways. For now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then we will see face to face. Now I know only in part; then I will know fully, even as I have been fully known. And now faith, hope, and love abide, these three —Stop there:

Pretend you don't know this passage: what would you guess, what would you expect, to come next? What you might expect is something like this: "And now faith, hope, and love abide, these three . . . are really important, and we ought to try to

have all three of them.” But instead we get this: And now faith hope and love abide; these three; . . .and the greatest of these is love. I’ll come back to this verse at the end of the sermon.

Sermon

That second passage I read about love—the one from First Corinthians—to most people, it’s familiar because they’ve heard it—frequently—at weddings. And if you have heard it at a wedding, you may know what sometimes happens next. The preacher, in his homily, his little sermon, usually says something like, “You know this passage isn’t really about romantic love, that’s not at all what Paul is talking about here. No, what Paul is talking about is non-preferential, self-sacrificial love, agape-love (always good to toss in a Greek word for the wedding party), love that’s not a feeling, but an action, an action we should perform for the good of someone else, regardless of how we feel about the person, even if we don’t know the person, even if we don’t like the person, maybe especially when we don’t like the person.”

Well, there you go: that just sucked all the air right out of the entire ceremony.

I mean it’s love—romantic love—that got them up here to be married; and they chose this passage because it spoke to their romantic love, and now you’re telling them that this passage isn’t about romantic love, and that really, romantic love is some kind of second-rate love that doesn’t have anything to do with the real deal, with God’s love, the love Paul is talking about in this passage, heavenly love.

Now I ask you: Is it any wonder we don’t get invited to the reception?

So today, I want to start with a few words in defense of romantic love, because romantic love—like all genuine forms of human love—does reflect—and does have a share in—God’s heavenly love. And to show you that I need to tell you about one of the great romantic heroes of all time, Tom Jones.

No, not Tom Jones, the pop singer who had his own TV show in the 70’s, that Tom Jones took his stage name from the Tom Jones I want to talk about, the hero of Henry Fielding’s great comic novel of the 18th-century, *The History of Tom Jones*.

Tom Jones—the hero of novel—is in love with a beautiful young woman named Sophia. But Sophia’s father will have none of it: Tom doesn’t come from the right kind of family, and he doesn’t have the right kind of money—in fact, he doesn’t have any money at all.

So Tom and Sophia, their hearts breaking, say good-bye. Tom can’t—he won’t—run away with her, take her away from her home and her family; it would ruin her; he doesn’t have any way to support her (remember: this is England 250 years ago). In response, Sophia says that she would rather have poverty and ruin and disgrace with Tom than wealth and ease and reputation with any other man.

Poverty and ruin!?! Disgrace?! Tom cannot do that to his beloved Sophia, he loves her too much for that. So because he love her so much, he will go away—leave Sophia. (“Love does not insist on its own way.”)

Where will Tom go?. . . who knows? Tom doesn’t care. . . All he can think about is Sophia. Maybe he’ll take that well-worn path of the lovelorn and go to sea. Or maybe join the Army . . . or go to America.

So he’s traveling on foot through the English countryside, with his trusty sidekick, a failed Latin teacher, turned barber and surgeon, an older fellow named Partridge. Tom is traveling with Partridge because . . . well, because Tom’s a romantic hero, and every romantic hero has to have a trusty sidekick. It’s a rule. As Robin to Batman, as Sancho Panza to Don Quixote, so Partridge to Tom Jones.

So they’re traveling on foot through the English countryside. It’s winter. It’s cold. It’s getting dark. And suddenly Tom veers off the road to climb a hill to look at the moon as it rises—that night, a full moon. Tom and Sophia, when they said good-bye, promised to look at the newly risen moon every night, and think of each other.

When the trailing Partridge finally makes it to the top of the hill, Tom turns to him, and says, “Just think, Partridge, right now the most beautiful girl in all of England is looking at this very same moon.” And Partridge says, “Most assuredly, sir, but I doubt she’s as cold and as hungry as I am right now.” But Tom doesn’t hear him. All he can say is: “Sophia, Sophia, oh my beloved Sophia, I will love you here—forever.” Over and over again.

And there Partridge is next to him. All he can say is: “My toes, my toes, Oh, my freezing toes: I will leave you here—forever.” Over and over again. It’s lunacy of course, literally. But wonderful lunacy. Wonderful, because just as the moon reflects the light of the sun, so Tom and Sophia’s love reflects something of God’s love.

Start with that word “forever.” Yeah, right. We always say it. And not just in romantic love, but in all other kinds of love, as well: “BFF”—Best Friends Forever. But how often do we achieve it? We humans, in all our frailty and folly, often fall far, far, short of forever. And yet we go right on saying it. Human love, always aspires to forever, however far, however frequently we may fall short of it. And in doing so—in our aspiration, if not our actuality—we reflect—however imperfectly—God’s eternal love: How did Paul say it? Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love never ends.

And I would add that even our frailty and folly has something lovable in it—which is why we always like, even secretly identify with (a least a little), that trusty sidekick. He’s like us. Our eyes and hearts may be turned towards heavenly love, but sometimes . . . well, sometimes, our feet get cold. But sometimes, every once in a while, like Partridge looking over at Tom, you can look over at someone and catch a glimpse of heavenly love.

It happened to me over the Fourth of July weekend. Our neighbors, Joan and Bob, were having a big family picnic, and they invited us. Once I got there, had milled around a bit, said my hello’s, and had my food carefully balanced on my Chinnet plate, Joan steered me to a picnic table where her 89-year-old mother, Bernice, and her 90-year-old mother-in-law, Olga, were sitting by themselves.

“Mom, Olga, Richard’s here: and I know the two of you wanted to talk to him.”

“Oh, yes. Richard, so good to see you. Sit down, here,” Olga said patting the bench next to her. Bernice and I have some questions for you.” And as I did, Joan patted me on the shoulder, and walked away. Sometimes you gotta sing for your hamburger, baked beans, and potato salad.

But truth be told, I didn’t mind. I’d gotten to know Olga and Bernice on their visits over the past couple of years, and they’re both delightful. And I also knew that Joan and Bob had not only their mothers but also their four adult children, plus one boyfriend, one girlfriend, one dog and cat, staying in their house for the holiday weekend. And knowing Olga and Bernice as I do, I knew some religious questions had come up in dinner table conversations. And I had a pretty good idea that, as things got a little heated, Joan had said something like, “you, know Mom, Olga, this would be a good question to ask Richard and Karen when they come over on Saturday.”

I turned around to look for Karen: she gave me a little finger-wave, looked down to hide her little half-smile, and *did not move one inch* in my direction.

“Now here’s one thing I want to know, one thing we were talking about” Olga began. “*They* [she gestured towards her son and daughter-in-law] go to a non-denominational church. Now what does *that* mean? There was no such thing when I was young—does it mean they don’t believe anything?”

This is why, as a teacher, you have shticks. “Now Olga, you know as well as I do that on the 8th day God did not say, ‘let there be denominations.’ A denomination is just an organization of churches that has its own rules, and beliefs and government, like Methodists, or Presbyterians or Lutherans, or Catholics, each is a little different but they have a lot in common. A non-denominational church doesn’t belong to that kind of organization; but they still believe things; they still have a lot in common with other churches. The church they go to is a real church—it’s a good church. Bob volunteers in the nursery”

Now it was Olga’s turn to shot me a little half-smile. “Ok, if you say so,” she said with a wave of her hand.

A few minutes later and Bernice gave the conversation a serious turn: “These days I watch the news, and I just wonder where is God, why does God let all this happen?”

A moment of silence, and then Olga said in a quieter—much quieter—voice. “I can’t get over Sandy Hook, I don’t think I’ll ever get over Sandy Hook. Why did God let that happen?”

What I knew, because I’ve known them for a while now, is that both Olga and Bernice still live near New-town, Connecticut, where Sandy Hook elementary school was, where 20 children ages six and seven and six adults were killed by a gunman using a semi-automatic rifle in December 2012. Neither Olga nor Bernice had lost family members in the tragedy, but both knew families that did. And both had been part of that community their whole lives. And Olga, had worked for years—and still worked now at the age of 90—as a full time teacher’s aide in an elementary school in the next school district over.

There are no shticks for this one. “I don’t know,” I said. And there was another moment of silence, a longer one.

“I guess we just have to accept God’s will—that’s all we can do,” Bernice said.

“No, Bernice, I don’t think so. I don’t think that was God’s will. And I think there are things we could have done to stop it, and things we should do now to stop things like it. And I think that’s God’s will: that we try, that we do whatever we can.”

“Do you think those children are in heaven?” Olga asked in a whisper.

“Yes, Olga, I do. Suffer the little children to come unto me.”

There was another long silence, and then Bernice looked at me: she must have felt bad about giving the conversation such a serious turn, because she looked at me, and said, “What I want to know, Richard, is what’s heaven going to be like? I mean: streets of gold and pearly gates—you don’t believe *that*, do you?”

“Well, I don’t know, Bernice, but here’s what I want you to do. I want you to think of the best day of your life, the best meal of your life, your favorite music, when you were with all the people you love best, doing what you love best, and everything seemed just right—peaceful—just the way it was meant to be, and all you wanted was for time to stop and it to be like that forever. Now put all that together and raise it to the nth degree, an infinite degree—that’s what heaven will be like—only way better.”

Olga looked at me skeptically, “Where’s *that* in the Bible?”

“In His right hand are pleasures forevermore.”

She waved her hand at me again, with a dismissive smile. “OK, if you say so.”

“You know what C.S. Lewis says about heaven, don’t you, Olga?”

“What’s that?”

“That when we get there, we’ll be met by the one person we need to forgive most, that most needs our forgiveness, and that we can’t go in until we give it. And then we have to go in together.”

Another silence. It took me a minute to realize that Olga, next to me, was crying. “Oh, you got me! “You got me! That’s Frank, that’s my Frank. I don’t know what I’m going to do, what I’m going to say, when I see him. But I want to—at least I think I do.”

I knew the family story: early on, Olga’s husband, Frank, took to drink, as they used to say back in those days. Family life was bad, and got worse, and he died young, leaving Olga and their children in a bad way. It was a hard life. “You got me,” she said through her tears, “you got me!”

There are moments in human life when time seems to stop, not because it freezes, but because it is fulfilled. Moments when everything that is good and true and real, everything past, present, and future, seems to be present, because all the goodness and the beauty of our being human, all the goodness and the beauty of our world, all the goodness and beauty of heaven seem to be there—in that moment. And you think, “This, this, is what heaven must be like.”

I looked over at Olga—lifting up her wire frame glasses to blot at her tears with a balled up red-white-and-blue paper napkin, her heart still breaking for the innocent children slaughtered, still feeling a love from—what?—70 years ago, when she was the most beautiful girl in all Connecticut, and still longing for, still hoping for, that love to be healed and the fulfilled in God’s love—I looked over at Olga, and for me it was one of those moments. Sometimes, every once in a while, like Partridge looking over at Tom, you look over at someone and can catch a glimpse of heavenly love, God’s love perfected in one of us.

“Olga, I think you got me.”

Beloved since God loved us so much, we also ought to love one another. No one has ever seen God; if we love one another, God lives in us, and his love is perfected in us.

And now faith, hope, and love abide, these three, and the greatest of these is love.

Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.