

**5:11-15**

For about 150 years, Ringling Bros.-Barnum & Bailey Circus's slogan has been "*The Greatest Show on Earth.*" But if he could, the apostle Paul would disagree. He would say God's love is the greatest show on earth. God's love--revealed and known in Jesus Christ--is the greatest thing on earth--and that's no humbug. The sheer enthusiasm of Paul's words here is remarkable: "*For if we are beside ourselves, it is for God [beside ourselves!]...For the love of Christ urges us on, because we are convinced that one died for all [one died for all]...and he died for all, so that those who live might live no longer for themselves, but for him who died and was raised, [no longer live for themselves but for him...]*" (vss.13-15). Of course, Paul makes other like statements: Romans 8:5, "*God proves his love toward us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.*" Ephesians 5:1, "*Be imitators of God, and live in love, as Christ loved us, and gave himself up for us...*" And Galatians 2:20, "*the life I now live...I live by the faithfulness of the Son of God who loved me and gave himself for me.*" These verses--and others--are really Paul's equivalent to John 3:16. So, while this may seem a bit odd, I want to unpack John 3:16, and then come back to Paul's verses and set them against that back story.

John 3:16 is one of those passages--maybe THE one--that presents a challenge to many a minister: "*God so loved the world that He gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but have life in the age to come.*" We've known this verse most of our lives. Any minister worth his salt, when faced with it, realizes it is so familiar that one almost despairs to say anything new or fresh. It is so great that one can

say nothing worthy of it. It is so comprehensive that one can say nothing adequate. And yet, every true minister spends his life declaring it--or trying to. Martin Luther referred to John 3:16 as the "*partum Biblia*", the little Bible--the gospel within the gospel. So let's consider a few facts from this well-known verse.

First, John 3:16 forthrightly proclaims the FACT of God's love. As Christians, we may think that such a truth is very evident and simple. After all, have not we Christians been told that over and over again? But actually to grasp the FACT of God's love in our world is not always an easy thing for Christians to do. To be realistic, as Christians we must drop our too-often easygoing optimism that lightly takes for granted the love of God. We throw the phrase around, post here and there like it was a pizza advertisement, slap it on our car bumpers, and we think we honor the words. Do we really?

If anything is true, it is NOT that God's love is always obvious in the world in which we live. We are foolish if we try to close our eyes to the things all around us that challenge our faith that God is love. Those things are real, confusing, and challenging. Even as we look at Nature, we cannot always be sure of God's love. Yes, there are many--MANY--beautiful and wonderful things in Nature which point to the hand of a loving Creator--in air and stars above, in great waters of rivers, lakes, and oceans, in the majestic mountains, in the sun-drenched fields and the crop-laden flatlands.

But there are many cruel, ugly, and merciless things that occur in nature as well-- "*Nature is red with tooth and claw.*" Also, it is not easy to convince people who have had their homes destroyed or loved ones taken from them by a hurricane, tornado, or earthquake that in this spite of this act of Nature, that still God is love. We may honestly say, "*If God is love, He has a funny way of showing it.*" Similarly, the study of

history--which I love--is an excellent summary of the ways of God with humanity, but I doubt seriously whether history apart from the gospel makes a person sure of the love of God. Indeed, many a person--just because of history--rejects the notion of God and God's love as a realities. And not with- out good reason. It is impossible to look at wars--past and present--and human persecutions--religious, racial, ethnic, etc.--and say, surely still there is the love of God. Surely the world of human affairs--with all that we see about us of injustice and inhumanity--of suffering and senseless tragedy on such a large scale as it really is--that is NOT the place to become convinced that God is love. Now, yes, of course, there is the other positive side to the human picture as well. But evil is real.

Yet John 3:16--proclaimed at the time when the cruel Romans ruled the world--does indeed assert that God is love. Part of the gospel is that God's nature is love, and his attitude toward all that He has created is deep and loving concern. The Gospel declares not only is God's nature that of love, but that he loves US--both John 3:16 and Paul's words affirm this. Outside of Christian faith, does anybody dare say that with certainty? If it is true that we really matter to God, if God's plans and purposes are for our real good, does not that make a difference? Does it not make a decided difference? For if God loves us, our struggles are worth all that they require of us. Our sorrows have meaning, our lives are not insignificant. God is indeed working out his good will through us.

Some years ago, a woman wrote to Ben Lacy Rose's advice column in the Presbyterian Survey: *"Dear Dr. Rose, I am confined to [my bed] and I cannot write for myself, so my daughter is writing for me. She is a wonderful per-son, and I thank God for her, but I feel useless...so very, very*

*useless...*” Dr. Rose wrote back: *“No one who loves is useless. No one who prays for and encourages others is use-less. No one who praises God is useless. To love and pray and praise God, that is why we are here.”*

What a wonderful answer to a kind of question we all ask. So, in the midst of our human problems and tragedy, if you are making a difference in someone’s life by being the face, the avenue of God’s love, THERE is God’s love for real in the world. If we have the faith to see and do on the basis of God’s love, then, there is the FACT of God’s love. That’s the first thing I would say. May God help us demonstrate the Fact.

Second, John 3:16 discloses the extent of God’s love---“*God so loved the world*”--Paul says, *“One died for all...”* Here is meant, for one, God loves all numbers of humanity that have ever been. Here, too, is meant that God loves all manner of humanity in the world. That is, God loves the world of humanity without distinction or exception. Listen to this carefully: To God, there is no difference of color, race, nationality, ethnicity or sex or age. *“In Christ there is no east or west, in Him no south or north.”* God loves us all. Further, to God there is no difference or preference by virtue of one’s native ability, education level, income bracket, personal achievement, or privilege by birth. God loves us all. God is that great. God’s love is all that encompassing.

And God loves us in spite of what we are. God loves the prodigal who is wasting his opportunities. God loves the rebel who despises authority; the ingrate who is thankless for goodness; the skeptic who does not even acknowledge God’s existence; yes, the terrorist, too, in his meanness. God says to us, *“Even though you despise me, and say “NO” to me, and slam the door of your heart in my face, still I want you to know that*

*I care for you, I am for you, that I love you. You cannot--no matter what--make me not love you.”* If we really get the gospel, we get that. It is completely a gift, completely.

Englishman Francis Thompson (1859-1907) wrote of God’s endless, searching love in his poem called *“The Hound of Heaven”*. Some of the lines are: *“I fled Him, down the nights and down the days; I fled Him, down the arches of the years; I fled Him, down the labyrinthine ways Of my own mind; and in the mist of tears I hid from Him, and under running laughter....Adown Titanic glooms of chasmed fears, From those strong Feet that followed, followed after. But with unhurrying chase, And unperturbèd pace, Deliberate speed, majestic instancy, They beat--and a Voice beat More instant than the Feet-- “All things betray thee, who betrayest Me...”* You have to read the whole poem 170 lines to get the full impact. But it ends, *“Rise, clasp my hand, and come...Shade of his hand, outstretched caressingly? Ah, Fondest, Blindest, Weakest, I am He whom thou seekest. Thou dravest Love from thee who dravest Me.”*

Methodist hymn writer Charles Wesley (1707-1788) caught the wonder of God’s love and grace in his hymn *“And Can It Be”* -- *“And can it be that I should gain an interest in the Savior’s blood! Died he for me? who caused his pain! For me? who him to death pursued? Amazing love! How can it be, that thou, my God, shouldst die for me? Amazing love! How can it be that thou, my God, shouldst die for me?”* Wesley sounds like the apostle Paul here: *“If we are beside ourselves, it is for God.”*

Yes, amazing love and grace it is. God does love each one of us individually. No matter what we have done in the past, or who we are, or what we will do in the future, nothing can change his love for us. As the Episcopal Prayer Book says, *“O God, who has embraced us with arms stretched out upon the hard wood of the cross...”* The cross

reminds us-- *“it was for me, it was for you, it was for all of us, he suffered and died there and poured out his love there.”* Yes, John 3:16 declares the great extent of God’s love.

Third, John 3:16 discloses the supreme manifestation of God’s love: *“That he gave his only Son...”* God so loved, He gave! Love is like that--it is always giving. That is the very nature of God and the character of love. Two people who love one another give of themselves--their minds, their bodies, their energies, their hopes--- to one another in sacred agreement. The person who loves Christ and Christ’s people does not hesitate to give in appreciation and love of what Christ has done. One cannot love and not give; love and giving act in concert together.

Yes, God so loved you and me--and the whole world--that he gave his Son. This gift of God is what we in the Christian Church acknowledge to be the supreme and best gift we have ever received--that anyone can ever receive. It is there in Christ we see what the apostle Paul was talking about as comprehending the *“height and depth and breadth and width of God’s love.”* There we see the cost of God’s love in reconciling the world to himself. There we see God commending his love to us *“in that while we were yet sinners Christ died for us.”* Misused, abused, misunderstood, often misappropriated and badly preached, the cross still proclaims God’s costly and incredible love. As Isaac Watts joyfully expressed it, such love *“demands my soul, my life, my all.”*

German immigrant, then pastor Frederick Lehman captures in his hymn simply called *“The Love of God”* something of the amazement of manifestation of God’s love in Christ Jesus:

*The love of God is greater far, than tongue or pen can ever tell;  
It goes beyond the highest star, and reaches to the lowest hell;*

*God's love so sure, shall still endure, all measureless and strong;  
Redeeming grace to Adam's race, the saints' and angels' song.  
Could we with ink the ocean fill, and were the skies of parchment made,  
Were every stalk on earth a quill, and every man a scribe by trade,  
To write the love of God above, would drain the ocean dry.  
Nor could the scroll contain the whole, Though stretched from sky to sky.*

Every Christian person should have such an awareness and such a profound sense of exactly that--the supreme manifestation of God's Love. And that brings us back to Paul's words here in 2 Corinthians 5. For it is such an awareness and profound sense that Paul writes, "*if we are beside ourselves, it is for God!*" To paraphrase him, "*If I seem like I am out of my mind, it's because I'm working for God...and the love of Christ urges/compels us on.*" When he says, "*one died for all, therefore we all died,*" (vs. 14)--echoing "*God so loved the world*"-- he means Christ died our death for our sakes. He completely identified with us. He came to our side for our good. He came to show that God is for us, "*Deus pro nobis,*" in Latin, to prove how God really is FOR US! No wonder Paul puts it in Romans 8:31, "*If God be for us, who is against us?*" Paul did what Jesus spoke, "*Greater love has no man than this, than he lay down his life for his friends. You are my friends,*" (Jn 15:13). Jesus calls us friends. Think about that. He befriends and does what only a true friend can do. He lays down his life for our sakes. Amazing! No wonder Paul is "compelled"! NO wonder he can say elsewhere, "*To live is Christ,*" (Phil 1:21). That simple, that in total.

Here is the magnificent motivation for our lives. As in Ephesians 5:1, "*Be imitators of God, and live in love, as Christ loved us, and gave himself up for us...*" Always Paul connects the love of God with the way of love toward others. The gospel is not a mechanism--a formula--for getting people saved in and for themselves. It is the

announcement of a Love--God's love in Christ--that has changed the world, a love that takes people who discover themselves amazingly loved, and sends them out to live, work, and love in the way of him who loves them. The energy and imagination for being a Christian, as one who works for the gospel, comes not from a cold sense of duty, nor fear of being punished if you don't do your bit. It exudes from the warm-hearted enthusiastic response of love to God's love that has reached out, reached down, reached into, and reached YOU! It, as Paul says, here "*urges, compels, hems you in*"--all ways of putting --to make you do things in ways that surprise or even shock other people. After all, if the New Creation has already begun in you to break forth into the world, you don't expect it to look like the old one, DO YOU?!

So hear those words again: "*For the love of Christ urges us on, because we are convinced that one has died for all; therefore all have died. And he died for all, that those who live might not longer live for themselves, but for him who died and was raised for them.*" Then, couple them with Galatians 2:19-20, and make these words your own: "*I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in [this body], I live by the faithfulness of the Son of God, who loved me, and gave himself for me.*" We died with him in his death for us. We have been raised with him by his Spirit within that we may live resurrection lives as agents here of the Risen-Reigning Christ above. "*It is not longer I--WE- but Christ who lives in us.*" Therefore, to quote St. Teresa of Avila (again): "*Christ has no body on earth but yours. Yours are the eyes through which Christ's compassion is to look out to the world. Yours are the feet with which he is to go about doing good. Yours are the*

*hands with which he is to bless us now.” “For God so loved the world...” “The Greatest Show on Earth.”--and that’s no humbug. And it’s not just a show. “It is the Lord’s doing “and it is marvelous in our eyes,” (Ps 118:23). Isn’t that truly something to be beside oneself about? Isn’t that truly something to be motivated for others’ sake also? Amen.*