GOD SO LOVED THE WORLD
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The love of God is a basic theme in the Bible and is the heart of our religion. “God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth on Him should not perish, but have everlasting life.” For the Christian this is probably the most popular of all texts, because the whole message of the Gospel is contained within it.

God so loved the world. This is the wonder. God is love. His power is expressed not in angry judgment but in creative love. He does not smash men into submission but draws them with cords of love. And this love is wide — it includes us all. God so loved the world. Not just one group, not just the righteous, but His love goes to all. As a good parent loves all of his or her children equally, however different they may be, whatever their merit, so God loves all of us.

We sometimes talk as if the God of love is uniquely a New Testament God. But the God of the Old Testament showed His love for His people in the Exodus from Egypt, in sustaining them in the wilderness, in making His covenant with them. Hosea perhaps expresses best of all the faithfulness of God’s love. Hosea is the prophet who struggled with the bitter personal tragedy of a faithless wife. He knew the bitter mixture of injured love and hurt anger, but he found he could not stop loving her in spite of her infidelities. He sees God in the light of this experience as the one whose love for Israel is abiding in spite of Israel’s unfaithfulness and broken promises. When Israel was a child, God brought him out of Egypt, carried him in His arms through the wilderness, drawing His people with bands of love only to see them turn away and follow strange gods. His anger and disappointment do not destroy His love. “How can I give thee up?” asks the Lord. “I will not execute the fierceness of my anger, for I am God, not man, the Holy One in the midst of thee.” God’s love abides. For God so loved the world.

And yet we live so often as if this were not true, as if we were aliens in a strange and hostile world, lonely and afraid. Why is this? “God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in Him shall not perish, but have everlasting life. For God sent not His Son into the world to judge the world, but that the world through Him might be saved.” Why do we feel condemned? Our text suggests it is because we do not believe in Jesus as the redemptive love of God incarnate. To experience that quality of life everlasting, we must believe, have faith in Jesus as the Son. As the writer of Hebrews says, “He who comes to God must believe that He is and that He is a rewarder of them that diligently seek Him.”

And why don’t we believe? Some of us perhaps all of the time, and all of us some of the time are unable to believe; we can’t understand how a God of love can fit in with the very real evils we find in the world. Nor can we see how the ethics of love of an earnest Jesus can be an effective world force. God so loved the world that — but look at the holocaust! How could a loving God allow that! Not love, but conflict, terrorism, rumors of war abound. Not peace, but strife, and privation, hunger, homelessness on the one hand and greed, over-indulgence, and abuse of power on the other. And plenty seem to perish. We need not focus on the larger scene only, but look
closer to home at the personal tragedies — the suffering, the inner battles, the sickness, the fears with which so many we know must struggle. How can we believe in a good God in an evil world?

The problem of evil is not something to solve intellectually. Jesus showed this when He saw a man blind from birth and was asked, “Who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?” And Jesus said, “Neither this man sinned, nor his parents, but that the works of God should be made manifest in him.” And He proceeded to show this precisely by healing him.

It is easy to say that all evil and suffering is the result of sin. And probably most of it is. But the important practical meaning of evil is that it exists so that we with God’s help and motivated by the love of God do something about it — that the works of God be made manifest. And through the healing power of the love of Christ reflected in His followers, God shows His love even in the midst of evils. As Augustine said, “God judged it better to bring good out of evil than not to have any evil at all.”

So it is the very presence of evil that provides an occasion to show the redemptive love of God. In our troubles and especially in the sickness, sadness, or struggle of those about us we know, it is better to show through ourselves God’s love and concern than to bemoan the evils. As a Chinese proverb puts it so well, “It is better to light a candle than to curse the darkness.”

But, again, all of us sometimes and perhaps some of us all the time find the love of God through Christ not something we are unable to believe, but something we are somehow unwilling to believe. And we stand condemned, judged. The Greek word means to separate, discriminate. “And this is the judgment, that light is come into the world and men loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil.” Perhaps for many it is not so much the evil of their deeds as reluctance to face the bright challenge of the light of Christ, that gets in the way, so we are unwilling to respond. We are asked, in believing, to be a part of that creative spirit of God’s love, and it seems too much. So we stand condemned, not by the Son of God who came to save, not to judge — but by our own selves. We are judged already by our own response.

It is possible to offer something great, to offer love, and have it turn out a judgment. An American tourist leaving the Tate Art Gallery in London said to one of the guides, “I don’t much care for your old paintings.” “Sir,” came the polite but pointed reply, “I would remind you that those pictures are no longer on trial, but those who look at them are.” So it is with Jesus — He is no longer on trial, but we in our relation to Him, and if we act with hostility or indifference we stand condemned.

But there is another sense in which a good person has an unconscious element of condemnation in him — when we compare ourselves with Him and see ourselves as we are. One of Socrates’ favorite and famous students was Alcibiades, the brilliant but erratic young Athenian general. He loved Socrates, but Plato reports on one occasion that he said, “Socrates, I hate you, for every time I meet you, you let me see what I am.” One is reminded of the Samaritan woman at the well who, after her conversation with Jesus, ran to town and said, “Come see a man which told me all things that ever I did. Is not this the Christ?”
Is not this what Christ does with each of us? But we need not stand condemned. God’s love in Christ evokes our love in return. The light attracts us from the darkness, and love changes things. And it is the very revelation of our being before Christ that shows the difference between what we are and what we might become with God’s grace that inspires us to want to become children of God.

Love changes things by changing itself. God so loved the world that He became flesh and dwelt among us full of grace and truth. Kierkegaard, the religious philosopher, tells a parable to account for this. A prince fell in love with a beautiful peasant girl. What could he do? Choose her, of course, elevate her to the throne, and have a happy Cinderella ending. But the prince knew if he did this, his beloved would never know whether he loved her as she was, or whether he loved the someone else he changed her to be. And so he put on the rags of a beggar and wooed her as a lowly man. Love changes the lover, not the beloved. That is why it is a mistake to think you can change someone directly by loving or marrying him or her.

What love can do is to inspire a response of love in the beloved, and this initiates changes. We love because God loved us. We respond to God’s love through Christ. And as God reaches us through His Son, we reach toward God through that same Son — and this is what Communion is all about. All true communion is of this sort. Think of two people — I and one of you. There is a separation: I and you, mine and yours. But when we come together as a we, and can speak of ours (instead of mine and yours), a higher unity is reached. There is a mutual alteration of the I and the you so that the we subject emerges. There is a mutual alteration of God through Christ and us through Christ so that the Communion of the Holy Spirit results — and we can say with Paul, “Not I, but Christ in me.” This is what reconciliation is all about. We are united to God through Christ, and reconciled to Him, in the experience of Communion.

But this is possible because God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son that whosoever believes in Him — responds with commitment of love — shall not perish but have everlasting life.

In this Communion service, in the silent moments, let us think on these things, the wonder of God’s love, and our opportunity to share that love in the lives our lives must touch. And let us be reconciled, one to another, in the love of God, through Jesus Christ. Amen.