

Lies We Believe About God – Part 2
“God loves us, but doesn’t like us.” (Pgs 23-28)
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Scripture: I Corinthians 13:1-13, Luke 15:1-10

I. God Loves Us

For those of you who have never been in a class that I teach or a group I facilitate, the first question I ask is “What is God doing in this story or text?” For me theology, scripture, religion, all of life, is first and foremost about what God is doing in the world. God created all that is and is constantly participating in all that is, as well as continually creating even more. This is who God is. Some, including me, would say this is what love is: the continuous creation of all, and participation in all. The “Good News” then to us, is not that God is Love... that is the very nature of God and should not therefore be news to us. Instead the “Good News” is that we, as created beings in God’s activity, are invited to participate with God in this activity. That means not only God *IS* love, but God loves *US*.

Wm. Paul Young says, “In the religious subculture in which I was raised, we all knew that God is love. We said it and sang it all the time, until it didn’t mean that much. It was simply the way that God is. It is like the grandchild who says, “But you have to love me. You’re my gramps.”

In our Christian tradition, we read hundreds of passages about God as love in the bible. The word “love,” itself, is one of the top words that appears in the Bible overall. The text we just heard from I Corinthians is all about love, and because of this, it is one of the most often used passages for weddings and funerals in churches. Many of you probably know most of it by heart, right? But when we hear this passage from I Corinthians, are you thinking about God or about humanity? Is this passage to show us how God loves, or how we should love? The answer, of course, is “Yes!”

This passage is the Apostle Paul explaining to the community at Corinth how they needed to behave with one another as they lived together in community. There was much dissent over many issues within the community at Corinth and they wrote to their founder, Paul, to get some advice as to how to decide several of the issues. The Corinthians had placed a huge emphasis on the role of knowledge and wisdom within their community and Paul, through this chapter in his letter, is reminding the community that Jesus, first and foremost, has called all of us to love one another and that this rule of love must be that which takes the lead over all other virtues or values. Paul writes, “And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing.”

Love has primacy, Paul argues, because this is what Jesus tells us about who God is and how God acts in our world.

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.

This is what God is. This is Love.

So, if we are to participate with God in the creative activity in the world around us, then this too must be who we are. Not just what we do, but who we are. This is how we were created: “In the image and likeness” of God. If love is our very nature and identity then we too will act through patience, kindness, humility, inclusion, collaboratively, celebrating all around us, rejoicing in what brings us most alive. In this way of being we are then able to bear all things of one another, believe all things, hold hope in all things, and endure all things. We are in community with each other and with God. This community never ends.

The phrase “God loves us,” holds all this to be true. In our minds and in the very core of our being we know this to be true. And logically, then, this should be the leading truth that defines our whole lives: everything we say, everything we do, right? Right? Is it? Do our lives reflect this all-encompassing love for God, neighbor and self? Is every choice we make based on this very foundational truth? Yes? No?

If we say we know that God is love, and we say we are created in God’s image and likeness, are we able to say that we too are love? Yes? No? The very fact that I am having to ask this question tells me that for at least some of us, the answer is “no.” So where is the breakdown in our logic? Do we question that God is love? If not God, then do we believe that we, ourselves are love? That might be the hitch, right? Everything we do is definitely NOT done as a reflection of the love we are created in, right? So, *the question is not that God is love, the question is how could God love us if we are not the love we were created to be?* This is exactly the “Lie” that Wm. Paul Young is questioning in his chapter entitled “God loves us, but doesn’t like us.” (pages 23-28 in his book). Let’s sit with this question for a bit before we hear how Wm. Paul Young addresses this statement.

II. Do We Believe It?

If the Good News is that God is Love, and God created us in this Love, and then therefore Loves us beyond our wildest imaginations... the question we have to ask is “Do we believe it?” Can God really love *US*? For many the “lie” that we carry around in our heads, and that William Paul Young addresses, is “God loves us but doesn’t like us.” We have this capacity to compartmentalize God and God’s capacity for being Love, but not really loving us as God’s creation. God may love us, as the bible tells us so, but God doesn’t like us and who we have become in all the bad choices we have made.

But honestly, I don't remember ever reading that caveat in the Bible anywhere, do you? Is there a place, maybe in Romans or Corinthians, where we are told Jesus doesn't like us, though he actually loves us? Not that I can remember. Last week we read Romans chapter 8 telling us that "Nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus." So where would we get such a notion, that God can love us, but not actually like us? Last week Will Howell blamed the "lie" on church leaders, creating and perpetuating this place called "hell" in order to threaten us all into good behavior or we would all suffer in the eternal lake of fire. Is this notion that God is able to love, but not like, us something we can blame on church leaders too? Probably, at least in part. And for whatever part church leaders have played in perpetuating this "lie," for whatever reason, I apologize on behalf of us all.

But I think it's more than just church leaders telling us that God is angry with us or doesn't like us very much. I would suggest that we, ourselves, have to take the blame for a lot of this "lie" in our lives. We, at least most of the people I know and have talked to in the last 30 years or so of ministry, do not actually believe we are worthy of being loved: by ourselves, by our neighbors, and especially not worthy of God's love.

William Paul Young tells the story in his book about being a speaker in a women's prison. The women were given what was called a "time out" to think about the choices that they have made in their lives, and they brought in William Paul Young to talk about his book, *The Shack*, which is about a man's journey to faith in a new way after the abduction and murder of his youngest daughter. In Young's book, God is portrayed as a woman of color who he names "Papa." You'll have to read the book to get the full picture of the journey of the main character, Mackenzie, within his conversations with various expressions of "God," but throughout the book Mackenzie struggles with his anger at God for allowing this horrible event to take place, and his own version of being worthy of God's love for not being able to stop it himself. God might *BE* love, but can God know him and his continual failings and still find something in him worthy to love? In *The Shack* "Papa" answers Mackenzie saying "I am especially fond of you."

One particular woman in the prison that William Paul Young visited asked him the same question through her tears: "Do you really think Papa is fond of me?" She's not saying she doesn't believe in God or that God is not love, she's asking if it might be possible for God to love *HER*. Can God actually know who we are, who we really are, and still be able to like us?

Young says that knowing and believing God is love, still doesn't really get at this particular question, can you love *ME*? This is why he changes the phrasing of Papa's answer to Mackenzie in his book. He writes,

"But saying 'God is love' doesn't capture our question, does it? So, I've made a habit of rephrasing the line 'God loves you,' and instead of making it about God, I make it about the object of God's relentless affection—us. Throughout *The Shack*, Papa would say, 'I am especially fond of her or him.' There is a world of difference between saying 'I love you,' which is about me, and saying 'I am especially fond of you,' which is about you. Both are correct, but the latter somehow pierces the disquiet of our souls and says, 'Yes, I know you love me, but do you know me and do you like me? You love because that is the way you are, but is there anything about me that is worth loving? Do you 'see' me, and do you like what you 'see'?"

This is the question we all carry with us. The question we ask of each other, and to God, every day. We never feel as though we are worthy of being loved. This is the true “lie.” It’s not that we don’t believe in God, it’s that we don’t believe in *US*.

To get to the heart of the *question* being asked by Mackenzie and the woman in the prison, William Paul Young had to turn the phrase “God loves you” to emphasize who God loves. But the *answer* to the question still comes back to what God is doing, not what we do or don’t do. We don’t have to be “good enough” for God to love us. God’s love isn’t dependent on us, it is simply who God is. God established that love in and for us when God created us. And, because God was the one who established this relationship, only God is the one who can change it. Nothing we can do will ever change the love in which God created us. **NOTHING**. We don’t even have to believe it for it to be true! How amazing is that?

Martin Luther tells us “God doesn’t love us because of our worth. We are of worth because God loves us.” (This is why I, the Lutheran, got this “lie” to talk about!) God’s love is not dependent on our belief, but our belief in God’s love is what changes our own way of being and loving in the world. If we could ever actually believe we are loved by God, imagine how free we would be of worrying if we are “good enough!” Imagine how our lives would change if we just gave up on trying to be the person we think we are supposed to be, and simply be who we actually are! And if we all did this – Imagine the change throughout the world! Mountains would literally move! Sit with this image this week and see if you might rephrase some of the lies you carry around with you about not being good enough. Try to look at yourself through the eyes of God looking at creation and saying, “it is good.” See if this makes a difference in your behaviors with yourself and with others.

The answer William Paul Young gives to the woman in the prison is this, “Papa is especially fond of you.” And the woman responds, “That’s all I needed to know.” Young ends his story by thinking “Darlin’ that is all any of us need to know!”

Amen.