

The Cost of Love

Psalm 23; John 10: 11-18; 1 John 3: 16-24

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Today's scripture passages are all about what it means to love. So, I thought we would begin this morning with some descriptions and definitions of love from the very best sources – kids.

Rebecca, age 8, says, "When my grandmother got arthritis, she couldn't bend over and paint her toenails anymore. So, my grandfather does it for her all the time, even when his hands got arthritis, too. That's love."

Four-year-old Margie says, "When someone loves you, the way they say your name is different. You just know that your name is safe in their mouth."

This is from Karl, age 5: "Love is when a girl puts on perfume and a boy puts on shaving cologne and they go out and smell each other."

Terri, age 4, says, "Love is what makes you smile when you're tired."

Here is how 7-year-old Bobby describes it: "Love is what's in the room with you at Christmas if you stop opening presents and listen."

Noelle, age 7, says, "Love is when you tell a guy you like his shirt. Then he wears it every day."

I love this definition from Tommy, who is 6, and who has apparently been spying on Dave and me: "Love is like a little old woman and a little old man who are still friends even after they know each other so well."

Cindy, age 8 says, "During my piano recital, I was on stage and I was scared I looked at all the people watching me and saw my grandma waving and smiling. She was the only one doing that. I wasn't scared anymore."

Six-year-old Clare says, "My mommy loves me more than anybody You don't see anyone else kissing me to sleep at night."

And finally, this advice from Jessica, who is 8: "You really shouldn't say 'I love you' unless you mean it. But if you mean it, you should say it a lot. People forget."

Out of the mouths of babes ... There is a lot of wisdom in these words, and we will return to some of them as we work through our scripture passages this morning. Our first text is probably the most familiar piece in the whole Bible, the 23rd Psalm. It is one that we learned by heart as children. It stays with us throughout our lives, especially in trying times. It is a touchstone of our faith.

The Lord is my shepherd. I shall not want. He maketh me to lie down in green pastures. He leadeth me beside the still waters. He restoreth my soul. He leadeth me in paths of righteousness for his namesake. Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for thou art with me.

That is the line that always stands out: "Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for thou art with me." That sense of Love's presence even in the most trying time is the center of this passage. By definition, each of us who is here this morning has not yet walked that valley, though some of us have come close a time or two. But we all must face things that frighten us, not just at the end of life but throughout our days – from a piano recital that might terrify a child to a serious medical test that scares those of us who are older.

From this Psalm we learn that God's abiding presence calms our fears and makes us safe. This is the same lesson that 8-year-old Cindy learned about her grandmother. She said, "I looked at all the people watching me [at my recital] and saw my grandma waving and smiling She was the only one doing that. I wasn't scared anymore"

I have never really pictured God waving and smiling at me before, but I kind of like that image. God, who shows up for every performance of our lives. God, who is our most devoted fan. God, who is with us and loving us – waving and smiling – no matter whether we succeed or fail by earthly standards.

Four-year-old Margie said, "When someone loves you, you just know that your name is safe in their mouth." This Psalm assures that our name is safe in God's mouth.

Our Gospel reading today uses the same shepherd image as the 23rd Psalm, but it moves beyond the assurance of our safety to tell us at what cost that safety is purchased. Jesus says, "I am the Good Shepherd, the one to whom the sheep belong, not merely a hired hand who runs away at the first sign of danger, but the one who loves his sheep so much that he lays down his life for them." True love, Christ-like love, is self-sacrificing, and it gives itself lavishly.

Some churches focus a lot of time and attention on the cross, on the blood and death of Good Friday, and they find the critical point of salvation in that moment of Jesus' death. That is not my own theology. As I have told you before, I believe that we are healed by God's coming to us in the first place. For me, the moment of salvation is at Christmastime – the coming of Emmanuel – God with Us. But Christmas necessarily carries Good Friday in its own heart. Because God chose to share ALL of our existence with us, including the scary, difficult, painful parts, including betrayal and death. This living with us, this dying, these are not easy gifts to give. They come at a great price, even for God. And in this we see love. Or, as 7-year-old Bobby said, "Love is what's in the room with you at Christmas if you stop opening presents and listen."

Our Epistle reading from 1 John reminds us that love is not about how we feel but about what we do. We love in "truth and action," according to 1 John. Love is more than a girl putting on perfume and a boy putting on shaving cologne and

going out and smelling each other. At the very least, love is about TELLING our feelings. As Jessica said, "You really shouldn't say 'I love you' unless you mean it. But if you mean it, you should say it a lot. People forget"

Or better, we DEMONSTRATE our love by the way we share our lives every day with those we love. Six-year-old Clare judged her mother's love by her actions. She said, "My mommy loves me more than anybody. You don't see anyone else kissing me to sleep at night." That is loving in truth and action.

But 1 John goes further, reminding us that, as Christ's love for us required sacrifice, we must show our own love by sacrificing ourselves, in large ways or small, perhaps even to the point of death. Though we pray that we will not be brought to a time of trial such as this, it does sometimes happen. Remember the parents who were shot to death in El Paso this month, shielding their baby. Yet this scripture reminds us that love is self-sacrificing even when it is on a smaller scale.

1 John asks, "How does God's love abide in anyone who has the world's goods and sees a brother or sister in need and yet refuses to help?" If we would love as God loves, this scripture says, we must be willing to give up some of what we have, some of who we are, to provide for those we love. A little of life is enough to teach us that someone gets arthritis and can't paint her own toenails, and love (as Rebecca observed) may require painting her toenails for her every week, even when our own fingers have grown painfully arthritic as well.

Each one of these scripture passages tells us something important about love and about God, but when we put them all together, when we read them as a cycle,

we have a conundrum. The 23rd Psalm assures us that God's love makes us safe. The Gospel of John reminds us that our safety was bought at a great cost, Christ's death on the cross. And 1 John challenges us to respond to God's love by giving of ourselves, perhaps even giving our lives, for those we love. So, when we come full circle back to the 23rd Psalm, we see the problem. Does God's love make us safe? Or does it require us to give up our safety, perhaps even our lives, for others?

The answer, of course, is that our ultimate safety is not in this world, but in the eternal world. What makes us safe as we walk through the valley of the shadow of death is not a promise that we won't die, but knowing that when we do, we will be in God's loving embrace. What makes us calm in the storms of life is knowing that our true life, our eternal, life is not bound by the problems we face here. And it is understanding our earthly life from this eternal perspective that makes it SAFE for us to live in Christlike ways that sometimes require sacrifice.

So, listen again to the promise that makes all this possible:

The Lord is my shepherd. I shall not want. He maketh me to lie down in green pastures. He leadeth me beside the still waters. He restoreth my soul. He leadeth me in paths of righteousness for his namesake. Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for thou art with me. Thy rod and thy staff, they comfort me. Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies. Thou anointest my head with oil. My cup runneth over. Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever.

Amen