

The Wood Between Worlds

A Love Supreme

Last year for his birthday, my son got a set of tools – *a hammer, screwdriver, measuring tape, drill* – which he recently used to make a gift for me. He worked eagerly on it for days and, when finished, gave it to me proudly and said, “*It’s a t!*” At first, I thought maybe it was a T for *Tom*, but when I asked, he explained that it was for me to use at my work. “*Is this the cross?*” I asked. “*Ya,*” he said, “*It’s for your worship.*” Now, aside from the fact that all parents hopes their kids will surpass them in some way and he, at 7 years old, has already exceeded *my* carpentry skills, what struck me is that, in his 7-year-old mind, when he thinks about worshipping God, the mental image that comes to his mind is *The Cross*. In his book, *The Knowledge Of The Holy*, A.W. Tozer writes that, “*what comes into our minds when we think about God is the most important thing about us,*” adding, “*We tend by a secret law of the soul to move toward our mental image of God.*” In other words, what we think about when we think about God shapes who we become in life. So, what about you? What comes to *your* mind when *you* think about God?

In his book, *A More Christlike God*, author Brad Jursak describes common images of God. There’s *God the Doting Grandfather* (or *Fairy Godmother*) who is nice, if a little naïve, lavishing us with gifts and answering prayers like wishes granted by a *genie*. There’s *God the Deadbeat Dad* (or, *Absentee Landlord*), an unhelpful, distant or even absent God who has abandoned us like orphans in the world. There’s *God the Punitive Judge*, who keeps close tabs on us, to punish our failures, or the *Meticulous Micro-Manager*, who has a hand in everything from little league games, final exams, and job interviews, to finding us good parking spots, the right partner, success in business, and victory at the ballot box. Finally, Jursak suggests that many combine these into what he calls *The Santa Claus Blend*, a God who’s jolly but mostly absent, using his

naughty/nice list to determine if we'll get what's on our wish-list. Perhaps the most terrifying image of God is from what's been called the most famous American sermon ever preached. In 1741, Jonathan Edwards gave a sermon called, *Sinners In The Hands Of An Angry God*, insisting,

"The God that holds you over the pit of hell, much as one holds a spider or some loathsome insect over the fire, abhors you, and is dreadfully provoked. His wrath towards you burns like fire; he looks upon you as worthy of nothing else but to be cast into the fire. He is of purer eyes than to bear you in his sight; you are ten thousand times as abominable in his eyes as the most hateful, venomous serpent is in ours." - Jonathan Edwards, *Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God*

Yikes! The question is, are *these* or *any* of our mental images of God even remotely accurate, or are they just projections of our highest hopes, dreams, and ideals mixed with our deepest fears, shame, and insecurity. How do we know if we're just *creating* God in *our* image? As we've been exploring *The Word Between The Worlds* this Lent, Pastor/Author Brian Zahnd has been helping us answer this question, suggesting that the best way to see what God is really like, the image that should come into our minds when we think about God, is *Jesus hanging on the cross*. He writes that, *"Being disguised under the disfigurement of an ugly crucifixion and death, Christ upon the cross is paradoxically the clearest revelation of who God is."* Cutting through all our messed-up mental images, Zahnd concludes that,

"God is like Jesus. God has always been like Jesus. There has never been a time when God was not like Jesus. We haven't always known what God is like — But now we do." (Brian Zahnd)

God is like Jesus. This is what the unnamed author of *The Book of Hebrews* writes, saying ***"[Jesus] is the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of his being"*** (Hebrews 1:3) She (or he) is doing their best within the limits of language to describe Jesus uniquely as the true and exact manifestation of God in human form. *Jesus* and *God* are like *a beam of sunlight* and *the sun*; or *a stamp* and its *imprint*. In other words, they're indistinguishable; inseparable. There simply is no God apart from Jesus. And Jesus — *particularly in his death on the cross* — is

what should come to mind when we think about God. So then, what *exactly* does Jesus on the cross reveal to us about what God is like, what God has always been, and will always be like?

The four Biblical biographies of Jesus tell us that he spent 3 years travelling and teaching, accompanied by 12 apprentices *or disciples*. Of the twelve, 3 of them were Jesus' inner circle of friends: *Peter, James, and John*. But if you read, you'll see that even among these three, there's one disciple who stands out as Jesus' closest companion and best friend: the disciple *John*, seen leaning on Jesus' side during *The Last Supper*, the only one of the twelve to remain with Jesus at his crucifixion, the one who Jesus, while dying, assigned to care for his mother, *Mary*, after his death. Jesus and John were peas in a pod, close as two friends can be. In fact, in *The Gospel of John*, he doesn't even use his own name, but simply refers to himself several times as ***"the disciple whom Jesus loved."*** (John 19:26) (*I wonder what the other 11 thought of this self-given nickname!*) But when John – the person who knew Jesus better than anyone, having not left his side for 3 years – wrote a letter to the early churches to tell them what God is like, based on his first-hand, intimate connection with Jesus, he penned perhaps the most paradigm-shattering theological statement in the entire Bible, outdoing centuries of libraries filled with PHD-level theology textbooks with only 3 simple words. John says, if you want to know what God is like,

"God is love." (1 John 4:8)

Having lived with Jesus, hung on every word, watched every move, and witnessed the cross, John's conclusion was that if *God* is anything like *Jesus*, then God is *love*. Because that's who Jesus is: pure, unconditional, everlasting *love*. To paraphrase Zahnd, *"God is love. God has always been love. There's never been a time when God wasn't love. We haven't always known this, but now we do."* This idea is central to the bible's most famous verse, also written by John:

“For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son.” (John 3:16)

The God who *is* love, *so loved* us. But this isn't just a happy-hippie, Lennon-McCartney *All You Need Is Love* kind of thing. In English, *Love* is a sloppy, 4-letter word, used for everything from *sacramental covenants between spouses* to how I feel about *cheeseburgers*. But the *Greek* word John uses when he says, *God is Love*, is *agape*. *Agape-Love* is more than a feeling; it's love *in action*, intentionally, selflessly working for another's well-being, without expecting anything in return. It's generous kindness and loyalty, motivated by deep affection and commitment. This love is at the core of who God *is*. It's a love John had not only heard Jesus teach about, but saw him put into practice daily, serving the poor, enjoying the company of outcasts, spending time with the sick, healing them not just with a sterile word, but with a tender, physical touch, and ultimately, filled with *agape-love* for the world, Jesus gave up his life on the cross. That's what it means, that *God so loved the world that he gave his only son*. The love that God is, the love with which God *so loves* us, is self-giving, sacrificial love. As John writes, ***“This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us.” (1 John 3:16)*** John here, as a good apprentice, is simply paraphrasing Jesus, who said, ***“Greater love has no one than this: to lay down one's life for one's friends.” (John 15:13)*** Consider for a moment: other than *maybe* the members of your immediate family, *who would you lay down your life for?* Where, outside of Hollywood, do we see a love like this? The Apostle Paul wrote, ***“Very rarely will anyone die for a righteous person, though for a good person someone might possibly dare to die. But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.” (Romans 5:7-8)*** On the cross, Jesus smashes the ceiling of our ideas about love, which are so limited, not just because the English language is sloppy, but because our experience of love is so inadequate by comparison.

When the world was poisoned by the serpent's venom in Eden, love became an instant casualty, becoming just a shell of former itself. God warned that strife would now infect human relationships, cautioning Eve, ***"Your desire will be for your husband, and he will rule over you."*** (Genesis 3:16) On the surface, this might seem to reinforce antiquated gender stereotypes, that women have a deep *longing* for love, while men are made to *lead* and *rule*. I'm no expert on gender, but that's definitively *not* what God is saying *here*. The best clue to the meaning of this phrase comes just sentences later, when God uses it again in the story of *Cain & Abel*, brothers who come to offer sacrifice to God. In the story, God prefers *Abel's* sacrifice, so *Cain* gets upset. Trying to encourage him, God warns Cain that, ***"sin is crouching at your door; it desires to have you, but you must rule over it."*** (Genesis 4:4-7) It's the exact same language God used with Eve – *Your desire will be for your husband, and he will rule over you* – but in *this* story, *sin's* desire is for *Cain* – not to *love* him, but to *have* him. When you bring *this* meaning back to God's warning to Eve, God is clearly urging her (and *Adam*, and *us*) to resist and rein in the human *desire*, the sin-sick instinct *to have* and *rule* each other, to *possess* and *dominate*, to *own*, *use*, *control* and *consume* each other only to serve and satisfy our own selfish desires. Folks, is this not precisely the problem we see at the heart of all our relationship problems? Centring ourselves and seeing others merely as a means to our own ends, using our power (*be it physical, positional, spiritual, sexual, emotional, or financial*) to use others to get what we want? From the very beginning, God warns that this kind of self-oriented *having* and *ruling* is the true enemy of *love*. This, not *hatred* or even *apathy*, is the opposite of *love*; the impulse to *rule* rather than *serve*, *take* rather than *give*, *have* (as an *object* to *own*) rather than to *humanize* (as a fellow *image-bearer*). *Me*-first rather than *you*-always. *Self-centeredness*, rather than *self-sacrifice*. *Lust*, instead of *love*.

This is love snake-bitten by sin, but the cross of Christ is the anti-venom that neutralizes and reverses sins toxic effects, transforming us into people who love each other, just as Christ loved us. At the cross, Jesus absorbed like a sponge all our *having-and-ruling*, saltwater-love and, when squeezed to the point of death, gushed a fountain of free-flowing, fresh-water, self-giving *agape*-love, becoming the clearest revelation of who God has always been, inviting us to drink deeply of this love, not just to receive and be refreshed by it, but to be transformed by it, to let a new *Cross-of-Christ*-shaped mental image of God move us, as Tozer wrote, towards a new way of being, becoming cross-shaped people who, like the God we worship, embody love, selflessness, and sacrifice, putting others first, showing empathy and compassion, forgiving each other, freely and fully whether we deserve it or not, extending open arms of welcome to all, being kinder than necessary, giving of our time and laying down our very lives, not just for our family or even our friends, but even for those who would try to make themselves our enemies.

Friends, if our lives aren't defined by this kind of love, let me suggest that the primary reason may be that we've not yet fully absorbed and been absorbed by God's love, by the God who *is* love, the God who *so* loves *you*. Maybe the first step is to tear down these idol-images of god we've allowed to live in our minds and shape us. If we've felt pressure to pretend we've got it all together, maybe it's because we've imagined a god who demands perfection. If we judge other people, cultures, or ways of being because, maybe it's because we picture a god who looks and thinks just like me. Do we justify our anger and outrage because we've been raised to believe in an angry and outraged god? Do harbour unforgiveness and hold grudges because we assume that even god can surely only tolerate so much? Are we disappointed and disillusioned because our fairy-godmother god hasn't turned our pumpkins into carriages or our frogs into

princes? Are we bound by guilt and shame, because we've trusted in a god who keeps us on the naughty-list? Is the reason for our loneliness, despair, and isolation that we think our deadbeat-dad just doesn't care for us? While nothing could be further from the truth, these imposter-images of God can sink deeply into our subconscious minds, shaping and forming us without us even realizing it. And today, I want to suggest the radical idea that some of us, in order to be healthier humans, need to first become *atheists*. *You heard me correctly*. A pastor is telling you to become *atheists*; to stop believing in *god*, or at least *the god of your current understanding*, to rid your mind of the toxic mental images of god that are ruining your life. And my prayer is that, by rejecting these images of the god who *isn't* – *who never was* – we might see with fresh eyes the God who *is*; the God who is *love*, the God who *so loves* you. The God who is only ever always like Jesus on the cross, the ultimate image and revelation of God. Love *incarnate*, a love *supreme*, the love that hangs on a cross at the centre of *The Wood Between The Worlds*.

If you've been around for a while, you know that this is the first time we've engaged in the season of *Lent* as a church, at least to this degree. *Lent* wasn't part of our tradition, but I know it's been a meaningful journey for many of us this spring. Jeff Martens has said a few times that the word *Lent* means *spring*, which is true. But more precisely the word *Lent* is just the Old English pronunciation of the word, *Length*. It means *spring* because this is the time of year when the days get longer. The dark and dread of winter is fading as the sun rises earlier and remains in view a little longer each day. In this season of lengthening *days*, around here our sense of the beauty and significance of the cross has been *lengthening* as well. As we've taken a *long* look at the cross to appreciate the *lengths* Christ was willing to go to reveal God's love to us, it has served to *lengthen* our faith, *deepen* our trust, *widen* our perspective, and *heighten*

our awareness of the love of God, as revealed in the symbol that stands at the centre of our faith. My own prayer this *Lent* season has been the Apostle Paul's prayer in Ephesians 3:

***"I pray that you, being rooted and established in love, may have power, together with all the Lord's holy people, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, and to know this love that surpasses knowledge—that you may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God."* (Ephesians 3:17-19)**

Here, Paul is being intentionally confusing, I think, in the sense that he describes God's love, not in 3-D terms we can understand, but as a 4-dimensional reality, having *width*, *length*, *height*, and *depth*, praying that we would *know* that which is *unknowable*—the otherworldly, dimension-defying, beyond-the-limits-of-human-understanding, ceiling-crashing, inconceivable and incomprehensible love of God. A love we can't fully understand intellectually, but can come to know experientially, as we let the cross-shaped, agape-love of God in, to fill our hearts and imaginations, as we dare to imagine the God who is love. In his book, Tozer concludes:

"The love of God is... the great reality of the universe, a pillar upon which the hope of the world rests. But it is a personal, intimate thing, too. God does not love populations, He loves people. He loves not masses, but men. [We could add, "God loves not just the world, but women."] He loves us all with almighty love that has no beginning and can have no end."

A.W. Tozer, The Knowledge of The Holy

In the early 1900's, when imprisoning people suffering from mental illness in institutions was still a legal and common practice, a poet (whose name is lost to history) found themselves in such a place. History reveals that these institutions were places of unspeakable horror where people, whose only crime was being sick, were robbed of dignity and decency, poisoned with drugs, and exposed to various forms of torture, trauma, and medical malpractice. All this, on top of the invisible prison bars and internal living hellscapes in which they were held hostage by their own bodies. We will never know what it's like to live in such a state, day-in and day-out until you die. Upon this poet's death, as the facility staff removed their body to clean the cell,

they discovered a poem scratched into the asylum walls; the only clue to the mental images that filled their tortured mind. Soon after, the poem's words were immortalized in the lyrics of a now classic hymn, simply titled, *The Love Of God*. As the band comes to lead us in singing this hymn as a response, I want to read its lyrics and invite us to see beyond a mere assembly of words and phrases, and enter into the artistry of the poet's vision, to know what is beyond intellectual knowing and be mysteriously transported into the otherworldly dimension of God's love, a love so vast and broad, high and wide, long and deep, surpassing thought, yet incomprehensively close to our hearts. Whatever hell you may find yourself in today, the love of God can sustain you, providing sanity in the storm. May you receive the cross of Christ as a gift, eagerly offered to you, for your work and for your worship, a mental image of God to move toward, to be formed by, a love that is *for* you, a love freely gives itself to you, a love supreme.

*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
The guilty pair bowed down with care
God gave His Son to win
His erring child He reconciled
And pardoned from his sin*

Refrain:

*Oh, love of God, how rich and pure!
How measureless and strong!
It shall forevermore endure—
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*

Refrain:

*Oh, love of God, how rich and pure!
How measureless and strong!
It shall forevermore endure—
The saints' and angels' song*