



Massanutten

PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

How Big Is God's Love?

A Sermon Preached by Ann Pettit

January 4, 2009

Second Sunday after Christmas (Year B)

Ephesians 3:14-21

One Sunday morning as I was talking with the children of Massanutten Church during the young people's message, I asked them how big they thought God's love was. As I expected, they held their hands apart at increasing intervals. When that didn't seem to satisfy me, they talked about it going up, and described various heights that God's love would reach. Finally, one of the children said, "God's love is so big it would go through the roof of the church." We've gone back to that description again and again, because it captured well the power and size of God's love - and by that I mean, its uncontainable nature.

It also seems like a good place to begin as we consider these words from Ephesians. Paul wrote this letter to the church in Ephesus while imprisoned for living out the very convictions he exhorted the Ephesians to make their own. The section I just read is a passionate prayer for the young church that they would come to know just, 'how big God's love is.' Like the prayer which Jesus prayed and taught his disciples to pray, this one of Paul's is not easily cast aside, although we may not be quite as familiar with it. The prayer is demanding in that it doesn't simply ask God to love the people of the church, but that the church would be rooted, surrounded and filled to capacity with the love of Christ. And what's more - that they would know it.

When it comes right down to it, therein lies the rub because that God loves us is not really an issue. We have nothing to do with that; it's God's choice, and through Christ, God's gift to us that we can be engaged in this life-changing relationship. God's love is not debatable - it just is. The question we're left with is how we respond to love that is 'so big.'

I had the good fortune of being raised in a family where the words "I love you," were frequently heard. My parents said it to each other; they said it to my brother and I and, I recall that we mumbled it back in some form as we grew up. That love was there was never a question in my mind. Yet, I distinctly remember the moment when my awareness of what this love meant deepened. It was a December evening and my father had just picked me up and brought me home from yet another band event. We pulled in the driveway and I hopped out of the car to go in the house. My dad also stepped out of the car, but he stopped to call out after me, "you know, you could at least say, 'Thank you.'" I remember being a bit embarrassed, and more than a little indignant as only a teenager can be at such a reprimand. But I also recall mumbling 'thank you,' and thinking about that moment a good deal over time.

I realize that this is not the kind of childhood event that great movies are made of or books written. But it was a moment of change that I return back to again and again. That my parents loved me was never in doubt, it was simply part of my world; that they reminded us frequently of their love was a given as well; but that their love invited me to relate and respond in a different and deeper way *was* new, and took some getting used to!

In a sense Paul was writing to a community that had been raised to understand God as removed; powerful and capable of love, but reserved in demonstrating it. Indeed, the presence of God had always been a forbidden and dangerous place. When Moses encountered the burning bush the word he got from God was, “*remove your sandals because you are standing on holy ground*” and Moses *hid his face* because he was afraid. Paul’s prayer invoked the presence of God to the church in a new way. He invited them to experience God’s love in its fullness of width and height and length and depth. But more than that - the love of Christ would fill the church prompting and sustaining its ministry, enabling it to be more than it ever dreamed it could be. And that this powerful exhortation came from a man sitting in a Roman prison cannot escape us - Paul knew first hand that God’s love was so big nothing could *contain* it or *constrain* it.

It was about a year ago that Paul (O’Gorek, that is) called and invited me to join you all this evening. It’s been a pleasure however, I have to admit – I was a bit intimidated. It wasn’t the preaching that made me nervous, rather, it was the amount of advance planning and thought he’d already put into the following year’s Lenten Season – and the 2007 Season hadn’t yet begun! Not too long after that he sent a letter to each of those he’d invited and included the theme for 2008 – *The Essence and Character of God’s Love*. Again, I have to admit, that I felt a little out of sorts as I contemplated an Ash Wednesday message based on this theme. When I think about Ash Wednesday, I think about Psalm 51, where the Psalmist writes:

*For I know my transgressions, and my sin is ever before me. Against
you, you alone, have I sinned,
and done what is evil in your sight,
so that you are justified in your sentence
and blameless when you pass judgment.*

Much more appropriate would be a focus on this aspect of God’s character, which would lead us deep into the guilt in the recesses of our hearts and souls. We should leave this service feeling miserable about who we are and what we’ve done, ready to dive into the next 40 days repentant and reflective. We should be throwing ourselves on God’s mercy, not resting comfortably in God’s love. After all, it’s Lent – not Advent!

Yet, the more I thought about it the more I warmed up to this theme as a pathway into the 40 days of Lent. Paul’s (the author of Ephesians, that is) whole prayer is an affirmation of the all encompassing nature of God’s love. There is no way to separate ourselves from its presence. In fact, it is this very confidence that propels us into a time of deep reflection, allowing us to look that the dark areas of our hearts and souls. We face our sin and

guilt because the love of Christ sustains us in that journey. And we know that the journey always, always, always takes us to Easter – to the Resurrection and the celebration of God’s saving grace. And so, after a year of musing on what seemed to be a strange juxtaposition of themes and church seasons, I’m finding that this seems like a good beginning to a Lenten Journey after all.

How big is God’s love?

It’s so big that it fills the church and carries us into God’s abundant grace;

It’s so big that we can’t control it or contain it;

It’s so big that we can look at ourselves with candor and remain fully in its care;

It’s so big that we can’t escape it, but can surrender to it completely.