

June 18, 1972
John 11:19-36
Norman S. Ream

IT HURTS WHEN YOU LOVE A LOT

It hurts when you love a lot! There are few here this morning to whom that assertion is not a self-evident truth. The more we love the more it can hurt.

Take for example a young man in love with a young woman. It may be just adolescent infatuation or what we used to refer to as "puppy love", but it nevertheless often hurts. The young lover longs to be with his beloved. Any separation is painful. He may pour out his love and his hurt in romantic poetry as did Elizabeth Barrett Browning when she wrote to Robert.

"How do I love thee?
Let me count the ways. . ."

And if the lover has even a thought that so great a love may not be reciprocated, the thought itself cuts at his heart like a searing iron. If the love is rejected, life no longer seems worth living.

Or consider parental love, that love we have for "bone of our bone and flesh of our flesh". It is not until we men become fathers and know what it is to love our children that we can ever quite understand those words of David concerning his slain son, Absalom:

"O my son, Absalom, my son, my son.
Would God I had died for thee,
O Absalom, my son, my son."

At its best there is no love stronger, more beautiful, more God-like, than the love of a parent for a child. And from that which is so strong and so beautiful can come the greatest pain and sorrow men can endure.

Yes, how that love can hurt. As a child grows the parent over and over again sees him do that which the parent knows is questionable and often foolish. But he cannot interfere; he dare not intervene. The child must take his own steps. Love itself demands it. But every misstep causes a wrench in the heart of the devoted parent.

Whoever it is we love, it hurts when there must be a parting. And a parting there must always be. Speaking of the Christian fellowship and of the love we have for one another at our best, John Fawcett wrote those well known and much loved lines:

"Blest be the tie that binds
Our hearts in Christian love;
The fellowship of kindred minds
Is like to that above."

Then he went on to tell us of the pain that is the consequence of our loving:

"When we are called to part
It gives us inward pain..."

Some there are who believe that the pain which must always follow love is too great. They will not any longer permit themselves to love because they are afraid of the disappointment and the suffering that a rupture of the love relationship may cause. They have been through it before and they know that agonia, the pain in the mind and heart, is much worse than pathia, the pain of the physical body.

To be sure, there is no way in which we can avoid all the spiritual pain and mental anguish which is so much a part of life, but much of it we can escape if we are willing to pay the price. It is relatively simple. Do not love. Never permit yourself to love. Avoid these attachments, these entangling alliances with other people as you would avoid the plague. Love no one, ever, and you will not know the pain of separation from those whom you would love,

But a life without love? Would you want it? Would it be any kind of life at all? Would such a life be worth the living? Is not the pain and the suffering worthwhile if we can but taste the unequalled joy and exhilaration which comes from truly loving another person?

Not to love is not to live. It is indeed better to love and to lose than not to love at all even though the price is sometimes a terrible, agonizing experience of pain.

II

Think then for a moment about the love of Jesus Christ. Think of a love so great that he who possessed it was willing to give completely of himself to men and women he hardly knew. Think of the love and compassion he had for the sick, the bereaved, the lonely. Think of him weeping over the inhabitants of Jerusalem:

"Oh Jerusalem, Jerusalem, how oft would I have
gathered thee to me as a hen gathers her chickens,
but ye would not."

Think of him weeping at the tomb of Lazarus, his friend; weeping not for Lazarus but for those little people standing around who could not believe in the love and the power of God.

Think of the love which could forgive those who were responsible for his own crucifixion and cry out:

"Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do."

Then, when you have thought of all of that, think of the love of God.

"The love of God is broader than the measure of man's mind,
And the heart of the eternal is most wonderfully kind."

And if it is true that the more we love the more we suffer, then think if you will how God must suffer. Yes, I think God suffers over the deeds and misdeeds of his human children. If he has a will for us and we ignore it, how can he in his great love not suffer? If he knows what is best for us and sees us constantly refuse it and ignore it, and if he loves us as Jesus Christ said he did, how can he not suffer?

This is not creating God in our own image. I have no anthropomorphic concept of God. It is no more anthropomorphic to assert that God suffers than it is to assert that he has a will. If he has a will then surely he reacts to our denial of that will.

How easy it is for us to be wilfully blind and ignorant of the love of God. From time to time I see people in great suffering because of their love--the love of young people for one another, the love of parents, the love of a husband and a wife. Unrequited love, unfaithful love, the separation of two loved ones, all of this can cause such great pain and suffering. But what about the way we treat Him who loves us with a far greater love than that of which we are capable? How do we respond to that love, "Love divine, all love excelling,"?

Thousands of young people in our country are today becoming more and more aware of God, of his will and his love. I do not always find myself in agreement with their concepts of God which are often a sticky sentimentality which conceives of Him as a kind of earthly lover who holds their hands and pats them on the back, but I praise and thank God that these young people are becoming aware of Him and of the difference His love can make in their lives.

I can testify to my own experience. God has sought to lead me along every step of my life's way. I have not always heeded him but he has always offered me his guidance and his help. Sometimes I sought it, sometimes it came in spite of me. His love has always been there, steadfast and eternal. Because I have experienced and am sure of it I want you to experience it and be sure of it also. The time is coming when you will need it more than you will need anything else in the world, and nothing else can take its place, not even the love of your family.

III

Does the great amount of hatred, anger and bitterness in the world ever appall you as it does me? Without strong faith in God, man's inhumanity to man must surely cause us to degenerate into soul-less machines and despair utterly of any better future.

Robert Drake tells of going home one day and while there visiting with an old friend nearing 80. While reminiscing she talked of Cousin Joe and said, "Cousin Joe died loving my father."

He "died loving!" How marvelous! How beautiful! Is not this the greatest judgment of a man, how he loved?

The two most basic ingredients of love are understanding and forgiveness. Because He perfectly understands us God can perfectly forgive us. Because he constantly forgives us he can go on loving us.

If there is bitterness, or anger, or revenge in your heart, you are destroying your capacity to love, you are separating yourself from God's love. And without love there is nothing.

Again, a poet sums it up for us:

"If love should count you worthy and should deign
One day to seek your door and be your guest,
Pause! ere you draw the bolt and bid him rest,
If in your old content you would remain;

For not alone he enters; in his train
Are angels of the mist, the lonely quest,
Dreams of the unfulfilled and unpossessed,
And sorrow, and life's immemorial pain.

He wakes desires you never may forget,
He shows you stars you never saw before,
He makes you share with him forevermore
The burden of the world's divine regret.

How wise you were to open not! and yet,
How poor if you should turn him from the door."

(S. R. Lysaght)