

God Loves Us

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[0 : 0 0] It's no surprise that on the front of our Giving 2020 there were red hearts on the hands because very much the subject about giving and loving is intrinsically linked because of that love that we seek to share. And it's very much part of the deepening discipleship of us at Christchurch, that sense of a deepening in love in our discipleship to know it's just not about us, but Jesus' command is to go and love one another. Many years ago, and it's going back some time now, there was a conference at Mindhead. It was called Bringing Home the Prodigals. Some of us were there. And Rob Parsons talked about this real passion that he had. And really, I walked away with this passion about seeing people know the love of God and come into relationship with him.

And he told a story. In a village near here is a large old house. An elderly lady lives there alone. And every night, as darkness falls, she puts a light on in the attic. Her son left home 25 years ago.

And like the prodigal in the parable, she has never given up the hope that one day he will come home. We all know the house well. We all know that house. And although the bulb must occasionally need replacing, none of us have ever seen that house without a light on. It is for her son.

I think it's a powerful picture of God's love that just keeps shining in the darkness for those of us, many of us who maybe have been prodigals in our life, who have wandered away, who have wandered away, but know that there is a way back, that they know that God is waiting to welcome them in his love.

So it is the first part of our four-part gospel. And maybe you have prayed, maybe you have wept, maybe you have prayed for those who you long to see to come into relationship with Jesus.

[2 : 1 2] And I want to encourage you this morning to persevere with that, to persevere with that sense of love, because that's us here. Yeah, I'd love to come back. Maybe there may be people here, maybe people listening to this podcast that would say, I would love to come back.

It's to know, as Rob Parson said, is when the Father's house is full of the Father's love, the prodigals will come home. When the Father's house is full of the Father's love, the prodigals will come home. It's our responsibility to be a place and a people in whatever setting we are, to be that place of welcome, of God's heart and God's love, to overflow. Nicky Gumbel tells a story of, in the Welsh revivals of two Welsh ministers, and they would walk on the hills praying, and they would pray for opportunities to meet with people. And they met with a shepherd boy.

The shepherd boy couldn't read, he couldn't write, but what he did know is he loved his sheep. He loved them, cared for them. That was his responsibility. And they drew him and conversations with him every time they met. And they taught him the 23rd Psalm by using his fingers, the Lord is my shepherd. The Lord is my shepherd. And taught him that as he prayed, that he should hold on to that finger as he prayed, to know that Jesus was his saviour. He came to faith on the hills.

It was about two years later, there had been a very hard winter, and the ministers had gone walking on the hills in the spring, and they looked for the shepherd boy. They couldn't find him.

And so they went to the village nearby, and they found his mother, who told them that in that hard winter that he had died, that they had found him in a snowdrift with his sheep underneath him, holding him. And she said, there's one thing, there's one thing I don't understand, that when they found him, he was holding on to the finger of his hand. The Lord is my shepherd.

[4 : 40] I think there are many of us that need to know that deep sense of God's love in our life again and again, to know how that overflows out into our everyday, and how we share that. And I could teach you the six great Greek words for love, and it would make me look very clever and very theological, but there's nothing wrong about heart knowledge. To be in our heart along with the Lord's, to know those that he is seeking to reach, to know that he loves us too. And many here will know that deep nature of love, of God's personal love in us and through us. This is a call of God into a deep, deep, deep, meaningful relationship to share with others.

That love that impacts into so many people's lives. We've just said farewell to our children as they go to their groups and they'll come back.

I remember years ago leaving church with my five-year-old son, and I think we had to go and pick up something at Tesco's on the way through. And Mar was obviously full of the Lord that day, and he went to a guy who was choosing a bottle of wine off there. And the conversation went something like this. What are you doing? I'm buying a bottle of wine. Why? We're having a party.

Did you know that Jesus turned water into wine? There was a silence as the man stared at his bottle. There was an uncomfortable shuffling, followed by a word that says, do you love Jesus? There was even more shuffling whereupon he said, Jesus is my friend. Did you want him to be your friend too? Whereupon obviously the man had realised that he hadn't bought something in the freezer section and made this huge sharp exit in this direction. Isn't it amazing how our children find it so easy to share the love of God with people, and yet we struggle. I really hope these plans will encourage people more and more to do that.

As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you. Now remain in my love. Remain. Don't jump in and out of love with Jesus. Remain in my love.

[7 : 22] I just want to encourage you that where the Brexit came and went, that we are all remainers. We remain in God's love. We are remainers. That's what we're called to do. You see, Jesus doesn't fall in and out of love with us. I don't watch Love Island. It's not my generation, but many of you will. And this falling in and out seems so superficial of falling in and out of love.

Jesus says, love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your strength. Love your neighbour as yourself. Remain in that love. Don't give up on that sense. And it's a constant.

So many Christians struggle with this constant, that love is constant for us, no matter what we've gone through, no matter what we're going through, no matter what we are doing. His love for us is constant. And that overflow that should go out into the community and the people that we meet day by day. You know, how come that the message of the church has been, if you don't love, ship up and shape out of the church? You know, if you don't fit with where we fit, it doesn't.

Where did that message come from? Within that sense of the heart of God's love, that all are welcome to come as they are, just as they are, to be loved and acknowledged and loved by God. This is a place we are loved for who we are, and in growing more and more in love with Him, that our hearts beat with tears. I've told you this so that my joy, so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete. Do you find that joy of seeing somebody come into the love of Christ? I can't think of anything better. On Easter Sunday, hopefully we'll have a big pool here, and there will be people who want to express that in baptism. So I'm really excited that I've told you this, that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete. So there's something about this love that gladdens God's heart. Why wouldn't it? My command is this, love each other as I have loved you.

I don't know about you, it's how I struggle with that in the week. You know, to love my neighbor as myself. You know, to remind myself of that overwhelming sense of God love. And Jesus speaks to us directly, he said, love each other as I have loved you. And what does that love look like?

[10 : 01] Well, he tells us, greater love is no one than this to lay down one's life for your friend. Who would do that? Who would lay down their life for their friend? And yet Jesus did it. And we've got a great example to follow. And this is where it gets personal, people, because it's between us and Jesus.

Because he says, you are my friends. Now, I know a lot of Christians have really struggled with that. You know, that I actually have a relationship with a person who flung stars into space.

What an enormity of that relationship with Father God. What an enormity of the deep well of love that we can draw on to share with other people.

Yes, that's what he says. And that we are part of the family. I no longer call you servants, because a servant does not know what his master's business is. Loving. Instead, I have called you friends. For everything I learned from my father, I have made known to you. It's about love.

Sons and daughters of the king, you did not choose me, but I chose you. Isn't that great to feel chosen to love? What a great thing when we go out from here to know that we are chosen to love and to share that with other people. A lasting love, a love that cares. Perhaps that's why in the Bible, Jesus used and used again this image of the shepherd.

[11 : 46] People knew shepherds. People knew shepherds cared. He was the good shepherd and is the good shepherd. They weren't particularly demonstrative shepherds, I guess. I don't imagine them being very lovey, you know? But they cared. They were responsible. They could be relied upon. They weren't particularly.

And the story of the prodigal gets me every time. And if you have parented children or caring for children, you will know that deep, deep sense of love. But you will know that deep, deep sense of frustration in times when, frankly, you just don't like them. There was a nervous laughter there, if you're listening on the podcast. I'm glad it's just not me that needs counselling.

But that deep, deep sense of love that underpins that. And there are times my children have driven me to distraction. And that phrase that I used again and again and again, do you know what? I love you, but I just don't like your behaviour at the moment. I love you greatly. I'm just struggling with your behaviour. But the love is constant. Jesus says, as the Father has loved me, so I have loved you. Now remain in your love. And here in Jesus' story of the prodigal, we see love. The Father who knew the Son would sin, who would sin badly, and yet he had the freedom to let him go. He allowed him to go, knowing that he would sin, but underneath are the everlasting arms that would be there to welcome him. The Father never gave up loving his Son. The Father that didn't chase after him down the road. The Father that didn't lock him up and not allow him to go. The freedom, knowing that he would mistake. Did the Father lock the door?

No, he didn't. Did the Father say, never darken my doorstep again? No, he didn't. Did he say, don't come back until you've paid your debt? No, he didn't. No, the overwhelming, ever-ending, gracious love of God was there welcoming him home.

The love that I don't deserve, but is always there. That keeps the light burning so I know that I can come home. Whatever I have done, wherever we have been, filthy in our sin, a list of everything I have done, and yet the Father doesn't wait. The Father doesn't wait for the list of sins. He doesn't even wait for his Son to tell him. But what he does is he watches out, and he runs to the Son. It was so counter-cultural. He runs to the Son, and he puts a robe on him. He even puts the ring back on his finger straight away. He restores him to where he was before he's even had the chance to tell him. He's been rehearsing all the way back to tell him as to why he should justify, as to welcome him back. He welcomes him back just as he is and does for us and for those we are seeking to reach time and time and time again. And many of the times I hold my head in my hands that I despair, that if I know that I turn, that God is there. How do I know that he loves me?

[15 : 10] Because he is there, ready to welcome us home. In those moments when life becomes overwhelming, when you sit alone, head in your hands, thinking to yourself, where is God now? Maybe tears spilling down your face, you lost your job. Maybe you lost a friend, you're disappointed, you had a rough day. Maybe you had a long stretch of illness and struggle, yourself or with somebody alongside you. Maybe somebody did something to hurt you.

Maybe you are so fed up with who you are, you think you're not worthy of his love. Many would know that. But it says in the service book, underneath are the everlasting arms.

I will not leave you, I will not forsake you. The one thing that I've found is no matter what we do, that God is the constant. Today we've been asked to show our love in several ways. You've got a heart that's been stuck to you. And if that heart is stuck to you, that is a heart maybe for somebody that you know and that you love. Maybe you have a heart for your community. Maybe that's the community of people that you work with. Maybe it's a heart for somebody like me that you long and pray would know and understand and come to accept that love that God has for you. Whatever that heart may look like for you, then it gets personal. Because we know, don't we? We know that love of God. Maybe we want to know that more, that we haven't really stepped into that. Whatever that is, we long to see those who we know returning into that relationship with Jesus.

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