

## THROUGH THE EYES OF LOVE

(02/14/10)

Scripture Lessons: 1 Corinthians 13:1-13  
1 John 4:7-12, 16-21  
Mark 12:28-34

*“Those who say, ‘I love God,’ and hate their brothers and sisters, are liars; for those who do not love a brother or sister whom they have seen, cannot love God whom they have not seen. The commandment we have from him is this: those who love God must love their brothers and sisters also.” (1 John 4:20-21)*

In our Sunday morning adult Bible study for the past year and a half we have been exploring various psychological approaches to religion. We haven't exactly been rushing through this topic, as witnessed by our having covered only Sigmund Freud's attack on religion and are only now studying C. G. Jung's approach, which I believe is essentially a psychology of religion.

It may sound strange to discuss a criticism of religion in a Bible study. I believe, however, that it would be a sign of weakness were we to close our ears and our minds to these criticisms, many of which contain an element of truth. I consider it a testimony to the strength of our faith and our beliefs that we can listen to people who have very different views from the ones we hold dear, and who perhaps even look down on us for our religious beliefs.

In Freud's provocative work *The Future of an Illusion*, he expresses his belief that religious beliefs are illusions. By “illusion” he means that they arise out of a wish. Freud believes that God is “nothing but” the projection of an wish we have for a good, caring, protective father up into the sky, a father who can accompany us through life and protect us from the dangers we encounter in nature, illness, accident, and death.

Freud's approach to religion is grounded in the philosophical tenets of positivism. Positivism, which ironically strikes me as actually a little negative, maintains that if a statement is not capable of empirical verification, i.e., if it cannot be proved to be either true or false, it is essentially a meaningless statement.

According to this standard for meaningful discourse, the statement “The moon is made of green cheese” is meaningful because it lends itself to empirical verification. All we have to do is travel to the moon, bring back a sample of the soil, examine it in the laboratory, and determine whether or not it is indeed green cheese. The statement

“God is love,” although it has a subject and a predicate, is really not a meaningful statement because there is no way we can prove it to be either true or false.

In our group we discussed Freud’s criterion for determining the meaningfulness of religious statements. Freud says we would like to believe that God is love, for that would be a consoling thought, but, because we have no way of either proving it or disproving it, the statement is meaningless. Freud considers it the mark of an immature mind to believe in something that cannot be scientifically verified.

One of our group members, in her response to Freud’s argument, maintained that something could be real even if its existence could not be scientifically proven. She suggested that love falls into this category. We can't see love. We can't prove it is part of our life or our relationships. If we examine the biochemical or neurological phenomena that attend what we describe as an experience of love, it isn't clear that what we are examining is what we really mean when we are talking about love.

The woman said that she had experienced love. She knew its reality first hand. She knew love was real because of the effect it has on her and other people, because of the difference it makes in her life and in the lives of people she has known. If someone had never experienced love and didn't even believe in love, it would be unfortunate. However, that person’s inability to experience love would make no difference as to its reality. Love is a part of life, a part of the fabric of human existence whether you have experienced it or not. By the same token, God is a part of life, part of the fabric of human existence whether you have experienced God or not.

If you experience love in your life, you see the world differently. If you experience the reality of God in your life, you see the world differently. Your experience makes a difference, often a profound difference in your perception, your beliefs about life, your relationships, your values, and even your meaning in life.

We now know that our old understanding of perception, the belief that visual perceptions are simply stimulations on the retina of the eye, the passive recording of

sensory images from the outside world, is simplistic. Several persons may perceive the same object or event quite differently. We move out to the world in our seeing. We structure the reality we experience. We see through our own eyes, through glasses colored by who we are and by the experiences we have had in life.

To a certain extent, perhaps to a great extent, we shape the reality we perceive. To a certain extent, perhaps to a great extent, we shape the world in which we live. The way we perceive something has a profound effect on how we respond to it. If this is the case, as it certainly seems to be, then it might be helpful to reflect on what it would mean to see through the eyes of love.

*First, what would it mean to see yourself through the eyes of love?*

You may find it difficult to love yourself in a healthy way. Perhaps you were not loved as a child, or perhaps the love your parents felt for you was not communicated to you in a way that registered. You may believe you are not loved for who you are but only for what you do. You may have adopted or internalized such high standards for yourself that you are always falling short. You may focus on your failures and shortcomings while your strengths and gifts actually drift out of your perceptual field.

Jesus said we should love our neighbor as ourselves. He did not say we should love our neighbor and hate ourselves. He did not say that everyone is important except us. Some of us seem to feel that God can forgive everyone, accept everyone, and love everyone but us. We need to see ourselves as God sees us, through the eyes of love.

*Second, what would it mean to see others through the eyes of love?*

William James, the great American educator and psychologist, in his book *Talks to Teachers on Psychology and to Students on Some of Life's Ideals*, describes the difference between eyes that see with love and eyes that do not. James writes:

*Every Jack sees in his own particular Jill charms and perfections to the enchantment of which we stolid onlookers are stone-cold. And who has the superior view of the absolute truth, he or we? Who has the more vital insight into the nature of Jill's existence as a fact? Is he in excess, being in this matter a*

*maniac? Or are we in defect, being victims of a pathological anaesthesia as regards Jill's magical importance?*

*Surely the latter; surely to Jack are the profounder truths revealed; surely Jill's palpitating little life-throbs are among the wonders of creation, are worthy of this sympathetic interest; and it is to our shame that the rest of us cannot feel like Jack. For Jack realizes Jill concretely, and we do not. He struggles toward a union with her inner life, divining her feelings, anticipating her desires, understanding her limits as manfully as he can, and yet inadequately too, for he is afflicted with some blindness even here. Whilst we, dead clods that we are, do not even seek after these things, but are contented that the portion of eternal fact named Jill should be for us as if it were not.*

*Jill, who knows her inner life, knows that Jack's way of taking it--so importantly--is the true and serious way; and she responds to the truth in him by taking him seriously too. May the ancient blindness never wrap itself about either of them again! Where would any of us be, were there no one willing to know us as we really are or ready to repay us for our insight by making recognizant return? We ought, all of us, to realize each other in this intense, pathetic, and important way. (p. 266)*

When we see others through the eyes of love we see them in a different way. Our perception then shapes our relationship. The apostle Paul tells us that when we love we will be more patient and kind. We will be less jealous and possessive. We will be able to give in graciously and not insist on our own way. We will have hope, even in dark times, and we will be able to endure struggles that would destroy those who do not love.

*Third, what would it mean to see the world, to view life through the eyes of love?*

There are many different ways of viewing life. We can dwell on the bad parts and react with bitterness, anger and pessimism. Or we can perceive and respond with love, understanding and compassion. It is a matter of which glasses we choose to wear. We create the world in which we live.

In our everyday lives, the choice is most often not between love and hate but between love and indifference. Martin Buber, the Jewish theologian, describes this as the difference between an "I-Thou" relationship and an "I-It" relationship.

The detached objectivity of "I-It" relationships has been overvalued in our culture. Men have paid the price for this in their retarded psychological development. Cool, detached objectivity was taught as the "professional" way for physicians, nurses, and psychotherapists to treat those under their care. But cool, detached objectivity does not build relationship, and loving, caring relationship is just as important as technology or technique in the healing process.

The existentialist philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche has said, "Cold gray eyes do not know the value of things." If you don't believe this, try looking at your spouse, your children, your friends, your pastor, or your church with cold gray eyes. See how quickly it will kill the relationship. Try looking at the victims of the earthquake in Haiti with cold gray eyes, and see if it will move you to respond.

Think what a difference it would make if we viewed our earth as a living organism and all the peoples of the world as our brothers and sisters. Our beliefs shape our perceptions, our perceptions shape our understanding, and our understanding shapes our response. This is why it is important that we view the events of our life and of life itself through the eyes of love.

*Finally, what would it mean to see God through the eyes of love?*

The difference between a theological analysis and a deep personal relationship with God was very brought home to me many years ago when one of my professors, a New Testament scholar, committed suicide by slashing his wrists with an electric carving knife. The religion that this man knew better than any of us here this morning was apparently of little value in helping him deal with the deepest conflicts of his life.

This man could write the most brilliant theological analysis of hope that you or I would ever read, but he didn't have any. He could write of that God who is the source, the sustaining and guiding power of all life, but did he have a personal relationship with this God? Memorizing the Bible or analyzing someone else's experience of God is worth little. It is our relationship with God that is important.

The only way we can know each other, truly know each other as each of us deserves and desperately needs to be known, is to love each other as Jack loves Jill. The only way we can know God, can truly know God as an intimate part of our lives, is to love and trust God as Jesus loved and trusted God.

There is something mysterious about this love we celebrate on Valentine's Day. It bridges the gap between two people. It spans the gulf between two worlds. Love transcends and gives rise to knowledge in our relationship with others and in our relationship with God. The more we love someone, the more clearly we perceive him/her. The more clearly we perceive someone, the better we know him/her. Love is greater than faith and hope, for love unites us with others and with God.

Several weeks ago one of the networks took us for a walk down memory lane, comparing some of the great Superbowl commercials with a sampling of creative commercials from around the world. The show brought back a lot of memories. Do you remember the commercial where Mean Joe Green of the Pittsburgh Steelers tosses his jersey to the little boy who has just shared his Pepsi with him? That one still gets me. Compared with some of the commercials from years past, I found this year's offerings profoundly uncreative. None of them prompted me to race out and purchase the product they were selling.

The commercial that touched me most deeply was from another country. It was an advertisement for an agency that provides services to the handicapped. In it a little boy is staring through the bars of a cage at a little dog. The owner of the dog pound tells the boy that he doesn't want that dog; that dog is blind. What he wants is a good dog, a dog that is not handicapped. The little boy doesn't budge. He continues to stare through the bars of the cage at a cute little one-eyed dog that is looking up at him.

The next scene is the little boy happily carrying the blind dog out of the pound. The camera slowly pans down to the little boy's legs. One of his legs is artificial, mechanical from the knee down. The little handicapped boy is lovingly carrying home

the little handicapped dog. The caption across the screen reads, "We need to develop the ability to see past the disability."

The little boy sees the dog through different eyes from the owner of the pound. The little boy sees through the eyes of love. He has the ability to see past the disability. If he can do this for the dog, he might also be able to do it for himself. Or perhaps it is the other way around: if he can do this for himself, he will be able to do it for the dog.

We are incarnations of God's creative nature. This means we are part of God and God dwells within us. Jesus tells us that God sees us through the eyes of love. No matter who we are, God loves us. Jesus tells us that God wants us to love one another, and God wants us to love ourselves.

In a time when people seem to have lost their sense of a personal relationship with God, the question, "How can we know God?" becomes important. We know God when we build a relationship that is characterized by loving trust. In a time when so many marriages are struggling or broken, when so many people are hurting or lonely, the question, "How can we know each other?" becomes important. We know each other when we see through the eyes of love.

In the week to come, let us make an effort to see through the eyes of love. Let us make an effort to see each other in the way that Jack sees Jill, in the way that little handicapped boy sees that little handicapped dog -- through the eyes of love. We might be surprised at what we will discover.

*A sermon preached by The Reverend Paul D. Sanderson  
The First Community Church of Southborough  
February 14, 2010*

## **PRAYER FOLLOWING THE SERMON**

God, we know that you are love. Because you are love, we are love. Help us to love you with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength. Help us to accept and love each other. Help us to accept and love ourselves. Help us to love as Jesus loved. Then, through the eyes of love, let us rediscover this wonderful, mysterious world in which we find ourselves. Amen.