

“The Proof of Love”

“But God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us.”

“Do you love me?”

In a scene from the classic musical *Fiddler on the Roof*, Tevye and Golde are discussing the recent engagement of their daughter Hodel to Perchik, a betrothal which is causing great worry to Golde because he is poor and will not be able to support her beloved daughter. But Tevya does not share his wife’s worries about their future son-in-law’s financial state: *“He’s a good man, Golde. I like him. And what’s more important, Hodel likes him. Hodel loves him. So what can we do? It’s a new world ... A new world. Love, Golde.”* Tevye then asks his wife a question that at first startles her: *“Do you love me?”* At first, she does not understand the question, then dismisses her husband as a fool. But he persists to ask her, *“do you love me?”* Instead of offering a simple yes or no answer, Golde points to all the ways she has shown her love to Tevye through what she has done for him:

- “For twenty-five years I’ve washed your clothes, cooked your meals, cleaned your house; given you children, milked the cow; After twenty-five years, why talk about love right now?”

Tevye continues to be persistent in asking his wife to say those words he longs to hear: *“Do you love me?”*; but Golde recalls that *“for twenty-five years I’ve lived with him, fought him, starved with him; twenty-five years my bed is his. If that’s not love, what is?”* Responding to the evidence his wife presents, Tevye now asks *“then you love me?”* All Golde can say is *“I suppose I do,”* to which Tevye responds, *“and I suppose I love you too.”* In the end, both husband and wife join together in confessing that *“it doesn’t change a thing; but even so, after twenty-five years it’s nice to know.”*

“Do you love me?” is a question that gets to the heart of many human relationships, both those that bind people together in hold matrimony and the ties that bind us together with our biological families or our families of choice. It is professing love for one another that is at the heart of marriage vows, in which the couple is

challenged by the presiding minister that “*if it is your intention to share with each other your joys and sorrows and all that the years will bring, with your promises bind yourselves to one another as husband and wife*” (LBW Marriage). These vows that bind the couple are a covenant of fidelity in which both promise to love and cherish each other for as long as they both shall live. It is these words of love and faithfulness that are at the heart of this sacred ceremony as it is “*with their promises to one another [that] they have bound themselves to each other as husband and wife.*” It is through the power of these words of love that each share that the bond of marriage is formed. But as important as it is to share these words of love (which Tevye insists that Golde share with him), this love is proven in action, in the daily deeds of lovingkindness that each shows the other. It is this latter proof of love that is at the heart of Golde’s argument: she shows her love for Tevye and their family every day even if she does not say it in the exact words Tevye desires to hear. But their love is real in the words that they spoke to one another on their wedding day and in the ways they embody their love in the life they have shared for twenty-five years. Every day in every way, Tevye and Golde have proven their love for one another.

There are many ways in which we can prove our love for the special people in our lives. It is important to share loving words, reminding the people with whom we are bonded that we love and cherish them. But true love goes beyond words to deeds, ways in which we embody that love every day. It may be small acts like a note we put in someone’s lunch box, or a small gift or card that reminds our beloved how important they are to us. It may be simple daily tasks like doing the dishes or taking out the trash; it may be flowers on Valentine’s Day or a special dinner on a birthday; it may be listening to one another when we are facing difficult days or offering our loving presence when we need a special hug. While some people seek to prove their love through grand gestures, it is often in these simple, everyday acts of love and caring that we prove the love that we also express through our words. It is true that “*love in deed is love indeed.*”

The importance of love is a central topic in the Bible, especially in its teaching on the love of God for God’s people. God’s love is so significant and so unique that it has its own word in both biblical languages: *hesed* in the Old Testament and *agape* in the New Testament. Unlike modern English that has only one word for “love” that can be easily misunderstood or confused (my love of chocolate ice cream is not the same as my love for my wife!), the biblical languages have distinct words that distinguish romantic love, love among friends and neighbours (“brotherly love”) and God’s divine love. God’s love is unique because it is rooted in the God who is eternal and everlasting, the God whose “*thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways*

my ways, says the LORD. For as the heavens higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways, and my thoughts your thoughts,” (Isaiah 55:8-9). This “higher love” of God is expressed throughout the Bible as the basis for God’s people to hope in a love that is the basis for their hope and faith:

- “The steadfast love of the LORD never ceases, his mercies never come to an end; they are new every morning; great is your faithfulness.” – Lamentations 3:22-23.
- “Return to the LORD your God, who is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love.” – Joel 2:13.
- “For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.” – John 3:16.
- “[Love] bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love never ends.” – 1 Corinthians 13:7-8a.

The proof of God’s gracious, steadfast love is at the heart of Paul’s teaching in today’s second lesson from his Letter to the Romans. Paul continues his teaching on justification, stressing that we are reconciled to God not through what we have done but through what God has done for us in the death and resurrection of Christ: *“For we hold that a person is justified by faith apart from works prescribed by the law.”* (Romans 3:28). If God loved sinful humanity enough for his Son to die for them, God will surely complete what was begun at such cost. The relationship between the justified person and God is a relationship of love on both sides in which reconciliation has replaced enmity; *“all that God said to Abraham, all that God accomplished in the Messiah, was done out of love, and designed to call out an answering love.”* (N.T. Wright). Because Jesus Christ *“was handed over to death for our trespasses and was raised for our justification”* (4:25), the result is that *“we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have obtained access to this grace in which we stand; and we boast in our hope of sharing the glory of God”* (5:1-2). God’s justification in Christ results in peace with God, in access to God’s loving favour, and thereby to the hope of glory. God’s peace is “from the Roman emperor who claimed to be a god and lorded his will over others through intimidation and oppression; *“it is a peace that reveals to the wider world the existence and nature of the alternative empire set up through the true Lord and Messiah”* (Wright). The result of past justification and the present status of grace is future hope as *“we boast in our hope of sharing the glory of God.”* (5:2).

This confidence in the hope of the glory of God is so powerful that it can even give God’s people confidence in the face of the adverse reality in which they live: *“And not only that, but we also boast in our sufferings ...”* (5:3). God’s people will

continue to experience suffering and persecution because of their faith and witness to the gospel of Jesus Christ; but while these sufferings will often be arduous and may even lead to death, because Christ triumphed over death through his glorious resurrection we have the assurance that *“neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord”* (8:38-39). While Jesus warned his disciples that *“you will be hated by all because of my name,”* he also reassured them that *“not a hair of your head will perish. By your endurance you will gain your souls”* (Luke 21:17-18). In the first letter of Peter, the Apostle calls upon his readers to rejoice, *“even if now for a little while you have had to suffer various trials, so that the genuineness of your faith – being more precious than gold that, though perishable, is tested by fire – may be found to result in praise and glory and honour when Jesus Christ is revealed.”* (1 Peter 1:7). God’s grace is so powerful that even things that work against such confidence and hope only serve to strengthen it, since those who know God’s grace also know that such adversity brings out patience and that such patience shows that God’s people can meet the test of adversity and meeting the test simply reinforces our hope: *“suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us, because God’s love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us.”* (5:3-5). This hope does not disappoint us because it is God’s hope, the first fruits and guarantee of God’s ultimate saving work (*“He who has prepared us for this very thing is God, who has given us the Spirit as a guarantee.”* – 2 Corinthians 5:5). The “love of God” that has been “poured into our hearts” is fulfilled by all those who love the God revealed to us in Jesus Christ: *“To find in one’s heart a Spirit-given love for God is itself more than consolation. To realize that this love fulfills the central command of the Torah is to discover oneself to be a member of the renewed people of God.”* (Wright).

As the love of God has been “poured into our hearts” through the presence and gift of God’s Holy Spirit, the proof of God’s love for us came in the person of our Lord Jesus Christ, who *“at the right time ... died for the ungodly”* (5:6). The death of the Messiah is the measure of God’s extraordinary love for humanity, a love that appeared “at the right time” (*Kairos*), the time of God’s fulfillment of the promise first made to Abraham that through this patriarch *“all families of the earth shall be blessed”* (Genesis 12:3). What God did, freely and gladly, demonstrates a love that is beyond anything human love can attain; for while *“perhaps for a good person someone might actually dare to die ... God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us”* (5:7b-8). Humanity was not merely weak or ungodly; we were living in opposition to God when *“Christ died for our sins in*

accordance with the scriptures” (1 Corinthians 15:3). The grace of God is the proof of God’s love for us because God so loved the world that did not love God in return that God gave his only Son, *“so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life”* (John 3:16).

- “Paul goes out of his way to underline that there is a total absence of worth on the human side of the equation; we have nothing to show God that makes it reasonable for him to give his Son for us; there is a total absence of human logic for why Christ would do this for us ... From a human point of view, Jesus died for the entirely wrong people, at the wrong time. Human love is a fitting gift; the Christ gift is unfitting. The former goes to proper recipients; the latter goes to the unworthy. As Luther famously put it, ‘the love of God does not find, but creates, that which is pleasing to it.’ – Orrey McFarland.

The grace of God is truly an “amazing grace” because it does not wait for us to return to our Lord; it comes to us even when we have strayed far from God’s presence and proven ourselves unfaithful in following God’s commandments. It is the grace that is embodied in the waiting father who welcomed back his prodigal son even after all of the horrible things the wayward son had done; he invites all to rejoice with him *“for this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found!”* (Luke 15:24). It is a grace that assures us that if God has done the difficult thing in giving his Son for the sake of the redemption of humanity that, an act that is solely at the initiative of God, then *“much more surely then, now that we have been justified by his blood, will we be saved through him from the wrath of God”* (5:9), when *“God’s righteous judgment will be revealed”* (2:5). Hope for our rescue from this judgment is sure and certain because God has already effected reconciliation when we were not just weak, ungodly, or sinful, but actually God’s enemies: *“for if while we were enemies, we were reconciled to God through the death of his Son, much more surely, having been reconciled, will we be saved by his life”* (5:10). The meaning and effect of justification is to bring humans into the forgiven, reconciled family of God, a reconciliation that is affected from God’s side by the initiative of love. The face that God’s rescuing love has found a way of deliverance and reconciliation is at the heart of the message of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, who as Son of God *“is the one sent from God to accomplish that which God alone must perform”* (Wright).

- “For God has done what the law, weakened by the flesh, could not do: by sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh, and to deal with sin, he condemned sin in the flesh, so that the just requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us, who walk not according to the flesh but according to the Spirit.” – 8:3-4.

- “But when the fullness of time had come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under the law, in order to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as children ... So, you are no longer a slave but a child, and if a child then also an heir, through God.” – Galatians 4:4-7.

Those who believe in Jesus the Messiah are the true people of the creator God who can now “*even boast in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received reconciliation*” (5:11), to celebrate the reconciliation between the Creator and those who bear the creator’s image. It is this reconciliation that is the proof of God’s love for us in Christ that is the basis for our boasting, the confidence we have in God’s steadfast, gracious love for us and for all humanity.

- “All who believe that their sin and the sin of the world are laid on our dear Lord, who was baptized and nailed to the cross for our sin, and shed his precious blood in order that he, the only sin-bearer, should thus cleanse us from sin, and make us holy and blessed – those persons receive forgiveness of sins and eternal life. Christ’s baptism, cross, and blood become their own.” – Martin Luther, 1540.

“*Do you love me?*”

While Tevye wanted to hear his wife of twenty-five years say those words, Golde responded by pointing to the many ways she had shown her love to her husband and family through her everyday acts of loving devotion. As God has proven God’s steadfast, gracious love for us through the death and resurrection of Christ and our baptism into that salvific action that assures us that “*if we have been united with him in a death like his, we will certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his*” (6:5), we prove our love for God and for God’s people through our words and our deeds, through committing ourselves to “*serve all people, following the example of our Lord Jesus, and to strive for justice and peace in all the earth*” (ELW Affirmation of Baptism). As we gather for our Annual Meeting today, we renew our commitment to prove our love for God and for the people God loves by being faithful to our call to be the servant church that “*has no mission but to serve in full obedience to our God; to care for all, without reserve, and spread God’s liberating word*” (ELW Hymn 729).

- “A church budget is a theological and strategic statement that translates mission, values, and vision into action, acting as a direct reflection of a congregation’s priorities. By adopting a narrative budget format, churches can turn line items into stories of ministry impact, ensuring every dollar

supports, rather than just sustains, the core mission.” – Catholic Missionary Disciples.

As God proves God’s love for us through the death and resurrection of Christ through which we receive “*forgiveness of sins, life, and salvation*” (*Small Catechism*) even though we were lost and condemned sinners who did not deserve such gracious love, may we be the bearers of God’s gracious love to all people in both our words and our deeds, so that the proof of our status as the holy people of God will come when “*they will know we are Christians by our love.*”

Amen.