

“THE GOSPEL IN GREAT BOOKS:
I – *LOVE YOU FOREVER*”

Karen F. Bunnell

Elkton United Methodist Church

June 15, 2014

Father’s Day

Psalm 23

John 10:14-15

Most of you who’ve been around here a long time know that I love to read. In fact, I’m a pretty voracious reader. Right now, I’m in the middle of reading three books at the same time – one is a biography, another is a non-fiction book by Adam Hamilton, and the third is fiction. I know that seems crazy, but it works for me. I don’t always read that way. Sometimes, too often than I want to admit, I start reading a book and read it straight through in about two sittings. A couple of weeks ago I read Cathy Gohlke’s new book, which is 420 pages long, in two days!

I think I’ve always loved to read, but after I entered the ordained ministry reading took on another dimension. I began to see Biblical truths come alive in books, and if I put my mind to it, I could almost always come up with scriptures that spoke to the theme of those books. Which is how I came up with the premise of the sermon series that I’m starting today, which will run for the next three weeks – the Gospel in great books!

As you might imagine, I could have chosen from hundreds of books on which to preach, but I limited it to just three – and they are, *Love You Forever*, *A Prayer for Owen Meany*, and *To Kill a Mockingbird*. I suspect that a lot of you have read at least one of those books, and perhaps some of you have read two or more of them. And maybe if you haven’t, after you learn more about them, you might want to.

At any rate, today, in honor of Father’s Day, we start with a wonderful little book by Robert Munsch called *Love You Forever*. Since it’s a little book, I’m going to read the whole thing to you, and the first thing you’ll discover is that it’s about a mother and son. Don’t let that put you off on Father’s Day – it could just as easily be a father!

So here’s this little treasure! (Read *Love You Forever*.)

How long did it take before the Biblical truths starting leaping out at you? Not long, I suspect! The truths in this book are very well reflected in the scriptures I chose for the morning – the 23rd Psalm and the passage from John, chapter 10.

And the truths are these – love is constant, love is supportive and protective, love is patient, long-suffering and forgiving; and finally, love is guiding and encouraging.

So let's spend a few minutes this morning looking at the love between a parent and a child, in light of these Biblical truths.

First, it's a love that's constant, always there. You heard the passage from John – “I know my own and my own know me.” How does that happen? When you're present with each other, when you spend time with each other. Ask a child what they like the most about their father, and you're likely to hear something about spending time with him. Actually, someone did do a survey recently where they asked people what was the best thing their father ever did for them – and an amazing amount of the answers revolved around the simple fact that he was there for them – going to their games, sitting down and having meals with them, reading with them, coaching their teams, going to their concerts. There is no more valuable gift between parent and child than the gift of time – especially in this crazy busy world of ours – when you take time out of the crazy busyness and choose to spend time with them – it says volumes about your love. Love, as the scripture says, is constant, love is present, love is always there.

Jesus knew that kind of love from his parents. The very first stories about him in the Gospels include his parents cradling them in their arms, and the very last his mother Mary standing at the foot of his cross – constant, always present love. The love of a parent for a child.

Secondly, love is supportive and protective. Hopefully, it never comes to this, but the scripture says, this love is so supportive and protective, that if need be, you would lay down your life for the one you love. It's the kind of love that walks with you, as the psalmist said, even through the valley of the shadow of death. Oh friends, all you need to do is watch the news these days to see that the world can be a scary place, and kids need to know they're supported and protected by their parents. They need to trust that they're not alone on the journey, and someone, you, always has their back.

Remember the time I told you about Tony Campolo's mother paying another child to walk with him to school down the streets of center city Philadelphia to make sure he was safe, and that when he got a little older, he pleaded with her not to do that anymore. Reluctantly, she agreed, and he thought he was hot stuff walking to school all by himself, without anybody watching over him. Then years later, he was at a gathering with his sisters and he was talking about his independent spirit when he was a child, and how he got to walk to school by himself, and they started laughing. Why? Because it turns out that his mother would sneak out of the house after he left and follow him to make sure he made it to school safely, and he never knew! (Tony Campolo, *Let Me Tell You a Story*, p. 9)

That's what parents do, they watch over their children and protect them and support them any way they can. Jesus knew that kind of love as well. Why, right after he was born his parents changed their travel plans and took Jesus home by another way because of Herod's threat to kill male babies! That protective love started early in Jesus' life and I have no doubt that Mary and Joseph would have done anything to keep Jesus from suffering. It's what parents do for their children.

Thirdly, love is patient, long-suffering and forgiving. That was so evident in the book, wasn't it? Even when that mother's child was going through wild times, she loved him. Some of you know what that's like, don't you? Ever had a child of yours roll their eyes at you, and make you feel about an inch tall? Ever had a child say "Whatever!" Ever had a child slam their door, tell you they hated you? Ever had a child get in trouble?

I suspect that the answer to most of those questions for every parent in this room is "yes." I've always said that there's a reason I'm not a parent, I don't think I could do it. It's hard work, really hard work. It calls for infinite patience and forgiveness, and sometimes, I think, the suffering is really hard – you suffer with your kids and for them.

And sometimes, I think, it must be hard to say those words that that mother said in the book, "I'll love you forever, and I'll like you for always." I don't know if Mary ever struggled to say those words to Jesus, but I do know that there were a lot of hard times for her and Joseph as his parents. There was that time when they lost him when they were traveling – they were frantic like all parents are when they happens – and it does happen to everyone at one time or another. And there was the time when Mary and his brothers sent word to Jesus that they were there, and his answer was "who are my mother and brothers?" That had to hurt a little. And oh, there were so many times that Mary had to watch Him suffer – watch Him be mocked and accused and doubted, watched Him be falsely tried and convicted, watched Him be put to death on a cruel cross. Indeed, a parent's love can be long-suffering.

Finally, the love between a parent and a child is marked by guidance and encouragement. I don't care what anybody says, the guidance and encouragement of a parent means more to a child than anyone else's. If I asked any one of you to tell me some of your mom's or your dad's famous sayings, you could do it in a heartbeat, couldn't you? I've told you before some of my father's biggest sayings like "Many hands make light work," "be glad you are able," and "we don't need to install a dishwasher, we have six of them!"

But seriously, the guidance and encouragement of a parent is so important for a child. I think I took the guidance and encouragement I had from my parents for granted when I grew up – I just thought everyone's parents were just like mine – encouraging all of us six kids to be all we could be, to be anything we wanted to be, and giving us all the tools we would need to be happy and successful adults. I found out later on, when I was in college and seminary, that I was wrong – not all parents

are like that, in fact, sadly, some parents criticize their children and pressure them into doing things they have no interest in.

It is amazing what encouragement from a parent can do. I read an article this week written by the great prizefighter George Forman. He said that when he was young his father “planted a seed of greatness in my mind about my future. As we played, he often raised my hands over my head as if I had just won a boxing match, and he’d shout, ‘George Foreman, heavyweight champion of the world! Stronger than Jack Johnson. Hits like Jack Dempsey!’ Even though I didn’t understand what heavyweight champion of the world meant, he planted an idea in my mind that eventually became a reality.” (On-line, kentcrockett.com)

The love of a parent for a child is guiding and encouraging. As the psalmist said, “he leads me, he restores me, he is with me.”

How do we know that Jesus’ parents were guiding and encouraging? Well, let me give you one clue. They taught Him the love of scripture, they gave Him that great gift, that great tool for living. Over and over again, throughout His life, Jesus quotes scripture – it comes easily to His lips. No doubt, He learned that at His parents’ knees.

The love of a parent for a child . . . oh, my friends, on this Father’s Day we give thanks for that, and especially, for the gift of fathers. No matter what kind of relationship you have or had with your father, whether your father’s love for you was or is marked by these things I’ve talked about today, or whether your father falls short or did fall short in loving you – remember this, the greatest Father in all of our lives is God Himself.

And His love never fails. His love is constant, supportive, protective, patient, long-suffering, forgiving, guiding and encouraging. No matter what, no matter how we treat Him, He never turns away, and loves us with an everlasting love. He, above all, is the one who unfailingly says to you and me, “I’ll love you forever, I’ll like you for always, as long as I’m living, my baby you’ll be.” What greater gift do we have in all of life than that? Thanks be to God for His love that will not let us go. Amen.