

## "The Vastness of Christ's Love"

A little boy was riding across town on a city bus. He was huddled close to a very well-dressed lady and was swinging his legs back and forth out in the aisle, like kids will do. Accidentally, he rubbed his shoes up against the woman sitting across from him. She got perturbed and asked the well-dressed woman, "Pardon me, but would you please tell your little boy to keep his feet to himself!"

The well-dressed woman looked at the boy as if she hadn't really been aware that he was there, then shoving him aside said, "He's not my boy. I've never seen him before."

Embarrassed, the little boy moved to another seat where he sank down as if trying to hide. It was obvious that the boy was trying to fight back tears. He looked at the lady whose dress he had gotten dirty and said, "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to."

When the woman saw what the reprimand had done to the boy, she felt badly about how she had responded. "That's all right," she said. "Are you going somewhere alone?"

The boy lowered his head and answered. "I always travel alone. My mommy and daddy are gone, so I live with my Aunt Maggie. But when she gets tired of me, she sends me to Aunt Elizabeth."

The woman then asked, "Are you on your way to visit Aunt Elizabeth now?"

The boy answered, "Yes, but Aunt Elizabeth is hardly ever home. I hope she's home today, though. It sure is cold."

The woman looked at the boy again and then said, "You sure are awfully young to be riding on the bus alone."

The boy piped up, "Oh, it's OK. I never get lost--but sometimes I get awful lonesome. So, when I see someone I'd like to belong to, I sit real close to them and pretend they're my family. That's what I was doing when I got your dress dirty. I forgot about my feet."

Hearing this, the woman moved over to where the boy was sitting and put her arm around him. Then she hugged him in real close. She understood that what he *really* wanted, what he really needed, was to feel that somebody loved him.

All of us *want* to feel loved, don't we? We may not ride city buses looking for love; we may not snuggle up to strangers. Instead, we seek love in a variety of manners. Adolescents seek acceptance by trying to behave like the crowd. Sometimes teenagers will do things that they know are wrong in hopes of finding acceptance, and acceptance is one of the first steps in finding love.

But teens are not the *only* members of our society who seek love in this fashion. Adults will sometimes sacrifice their principles in business because they know they might get a lucrative contract. Adults will seek acceptance from the power brokers by behaving in ways which are uncharacteristic, just so they can be remembered at a later and more opportune time.

Why is it that we *succumb* to such conduct? I wonder if there is something within us mandating that we have to *do* something in order to *find* love. Maybe it all goes back to our childhood. We were *rewarded* for being good and *punished* for being bad. As children, we sought to please our parents, because maybe deep down inside us we thought if we could please them, then they would love us . . . or love us more. But for most of us, our behavior actually had nothing to do with whether our parents loved us or not. Our behavior was not *considered* in the love quotient. Our parents loved us, regardless.

That is how Christ's love works. There is nothing we can *do* to merit his love; there are no *actions* that we can perform to repay *him* for loving us. Nor does he even ask for retribution. Instead, Jesus loves us simply because we are individuals. Jesus does not love us for being *good*, or love us *more* in hopes that we will *not* be bad. Jesus loves us just because we *are*. And this love is greater than we can even imagine.

Paul prayed that the church at Ephesus would be *rooted* and *grounded* in love. "Rooted" is an agricultural term denoting the firm bed in which plants are set. If there is not enough soil for an

adequate root system, then a plant cannot live. It may look fine for a while, but its life will be short. If a *family* does not have love as its most basic element, it will not last. If a *church* is not rooted in love, if love is not at the core of its existence, then the church may thrive for a period of time, but eventually will wither and die.

Paul also spoke *architecturally* when saying that the church must be *grounded* in love. Its very foundation must be love. Without a solid foundation, a building could crumble. Without love as the motivation for parenting, a child will grow up with a *legalistic* view of the world, only concerned with what is right and wrong. This is the difference between discipline and punishment. Discipline, with love as its essence, teaches a child how to *live*. Punishment, with appropriateness as its motivation, teaches a child how to *act*; straying beyond the established parameters can result in loss of relationship. Parents should establish love as the foundation of their homelife. The same is true with a church. If love is not at the foundation of a church's scope, then the church will eventually crumble. If love is not the motivating factor in ministering to a community, then the effort is pointless. If love is not behind the actions of working with children through our church, then the task is in vain. If our incentive in doing anything as a church is not love, then we are like a plant with an inadequate root system or a building on a faulty foundation.

And how has this love been expressed to us? Through the example of Christ. Paul told the Ephesians that the love of Jesus is *vast*. His description reminds me of the universe. Christ's love is as limitless as the sky above, to the limitless horizons on every side, to the depth of the earth's core, or even to the bottom of the ocean's depths. The love of Christ is as vast as all that.

Commentator William Barclay writes, "In the breadth of its sweep, the love of Christ includes *every* person of *every* kind in *every* age in *every* world; in the length to which it would go, the love of Christ accepted even the cross; in its depth, it descended to experience even death; in its height, he still loves us in heaven, where he ever lives to make intercession for us (Hebrews 7:25). *No* person is outside the love of Christ; *no* place is without his reach." (William Barclay. Galatians and Ephesians. Philadelphia: Westminster Press. 1976. p. 133)

Unfortunately for us, we allow barriers to keep this *boundless* love *barricaded*. We regularly encounter people who are different from us. We all know of some traditions that intend for people to be separated. Some of these traditions are racial; some are socio-economic; some are cultural; some are even religious. It is unfortunate that some Christians cannot see others as *individuals*, but instead see them as Asian or Middle Eastern, Protestant or Catholic, Democrat or Republican, Muslim or Jewish. Some are seen as poor or rich, white or black, divorced or married, been-here or come-here. Some are seen as young or old, blue collar or white collar, Yankee or Southerner, Christian or non-Christian. Yet if we are rooted and grounded in love, we will see that the love of Jesus knows *no* limits. Then and only then will we fully understand the breadth, length, height, and depth of God's love.

So how can this love be shared? How do we *overcome* these barriers that are so strictly ingrained within us? Through the Church. Paul was writing to the Ephesians a letter of how he thought a church should operate. This letter was then passed on to other churches as an example.

Today, the letter and its message have been passed on to us. To be fully the church that God intends for us to be, then we have to act literally as the body of Christ. We have to be his hands and his feet in a world that needs the love of the Savior. The Church should be known for loving "counter-culturally," meaning that we look beyond the externals and love individuals. Loving someone who is like us and has our values is certainly more natural than loving the person whose differences exceed our similarities. To overcome the barriers, we consciously have to remind ourselves that when we look in the eyes of someone else, we experience a person who has been created in the image of God. When we speak to someone or an individual addresses us, we consciously need to remember that this is a person for whom Christ died, a person whom God loves equally to us. If the Church doesn't take

Christ's love to the world, then the world will not know that Jesus loves them. And in taking the love of Jesus into the world, we have to start with our *own* worlds. God loves us all equally; even though we may be packaged differently, every individual looks the same to God.

A store owner was tacking a sign above his door that read, "Puppies for Sale." Signs like that have a way of attracting small children, and sure enough, a little boy appeared under the store owner's sign. "How much are you going to sell the puppies for?" he asked.

The store owner replied, "Anywhere from \$30 to \$50."

The little boy reached in his pocket and pulled out some change. "I have \$2.37," he said. "Can I please look at them?"

The store owner smiled and whistled and out of the kennel came Lady, who ran down the aisle of his store followed by five teeny, tiny balls of fur. One puppy was lagging considerably behind. Immediately, the little boy singled out the lagging, limping, puppy and said, "What's wrong with that little dog?"

The store owner explained that the veterinarian had examined the little puppy and had discovered it didn't have a hip socket. It would always have a limp. It would always be lame. The little boy became excited. "That is the little puppy that I want to buy."

The store owner said, "No, you don't want to buy that little dog. If you really want him, I'll just give him to you."

The little boy got quite upset. He looked straight into the store owner's eyes, pointing his finger, and said, "I don't want you to *give* him to me. That little dog is worth every bit as much as all the other dogs, and I'll pay full price. In fact, I'll give you \$2.37 now, and 50 cents a month until I have him paid for."

The store owner countered, "You really don't want to buy this little dog. He is never going to be able to run and play with you like the other puppies."

To this, the little boy reached down and rolled up his pant leg to reveal a badly twisted, crippled left leg supported by a big metal brace. He looked up at the store owner and softly replied, "Well, I don't run so well myself, and the little puppy will need someone who understands." (Jack Canfield and Mark Victor Hansen, compilers. Chicken Soup for the Soul. Deerfield Beach, FL: Health Communications, Inc. 1993. p. 65-66)

Jesus came so that all of us, whether we have crippled legs or infirmed reputations, would know that God loves us. And the mission of the Church is to proclaim that love to all people. In sharing that love, we have to recognize that we are all flawed, and if God can love us with our flaws, then certainly God loves everyone as individuals; the question today is, how are we sharing the love of Jesus with individuals, those who have been created in the image of God, those for whom Christ died? Thanks be to God for the vastness of God's love.