

Sermon Proper 25

Year C

Will We Accept God's Love?

[RCL] Joel 2:23-32; Psalm 65; 2 Timothy 4:6-8, 16-18; Luke 18:9-14

A prayer by Jacqueline Bergan and S Marie Schwann says, "Lord my God, when Your loved spilled over into creation You thought of me. I am from love, of love, for love."ⁱ

What an awesome claim! When God first created, God did it with us in mind. In fact, the reason for creation itself was so God could create us in order to receive God's love, to participate in God's love, flourish in it, take joy in it. We are no afterthoughts, no fortunate bystanders, no accidents. God made us from love, of love, for love.

The fundamental question every single human being asks is, Do you love me? And the answer from God is an unequivocal, unashamed, unabashed, yes.

Will we accept that love?

The prayer is beautiful, but it presents a challenge. "Lord my God, when your love spilled over into creation, you thought of me" Really? Isn't that a little too much? A little over-stated? Can it actually be a fact that not only is there a God, and not only is the nature of God love, but the divine love that threw the stars and molded the dry land and set all the protons and neutrons and quarks and photons humming and buzzing--that divine love is actually directed at us? Us in particular. And God is just longing to love us and rain down on us an abundance of grace and favor, and all we need to do is receive it? Can that really be?

Although biologists and psychologists, physiologists and sociologists say we are hard-wired for relationship, and theologians say we are created for relationship with a God who loves us just because we exist, somehow, we get this idea we have to be worthy of being loved. We have to deserve it, earn it. We turn the question, "Do you love me?" into "What must I do to be worthy of love?"

If you're not ready to admit this for yourself, think about all the examples of people you know who operate under this assumption. Think of every bad decision a friend has made in a relationship in order to prove herself worthy of love. Think of every poor choice a teenager has made to prove himself worthy of some affection or attention. Think of every child who fears, even for a moment, that something they have done will cause their parent to love them less.

Think of every time you've heard something like this: the woman said to the girl, "Remember, we're going to see Chris. You have to be good when we get there, because Chris only likes girls who behave

all the time.” Who is this Chris? Santa Claus? But who knows, what if it’s true? Maybe Chris does only like children who behave all the time.

We do know human love is less than perfect. We know, all too well, that the well of human love can run dry. And we project our small human experiences of finite love onto God. And the result is we think we must be worthy of love, including God’s, and this attendant heresy: God’s only got so much love to give. We sometimes live as if we might hear the following breaking news bulletin: Sources report that the price of God’s love has gone up five dollars a barrel due to high demand and short supply. A break in the pipeline and problems in offshore drilling for God’s love means that further shortages and price hikes are in store. People are urged to decrease their consumption and look for substitutes for God’s love. Current practices of being conduits of God’s love and lavishing it on others, including children, the weak, the vulnerable, and the poor must be stopped immediately.

Rather than thinking of God as God is known in our scripture and our liturgy and our faith tradition, as the source of all love, unquenchable, unstoppable, self-giving love, with oceans full of love to give, we think of God’s love meted out in teaspoons full, eyedroppers full, and we need to qualify, even compete, to get some of it.

So when we hear today’s parable, of the Pharisee and the Tax Collector, we all too easily hear this interpretation: A Self-Righteous Pharisee says his prayers in the temple. He is prideful and self-congratulatory. A Tax collector also says his prayers, but, unlike the Pharisee, he is humble. God hears the prayers of the humble tax collector, and does not listen to the self-righteous Pharisee. The moral of the story is: be humble like the Tax Collector. The Tax Collector has discovered the secret--he has found the way to win approval in the eyes of God: humility! Be like the Tax Collector and you too will be able to say, Thank God I’m not like that Pharisee!

And there’s the trap that betrays this way of interpreting the story. This is not a parable about winning God’s love. This is not a story about substituting one bad way to try to get God to listen to you--being self-righteousness--with a way God likes, humility.

Rather, it’s a story in which two seemingly unlike characters stand before God and are really very much the same. They both need God’s love and forgiveness. They are both loved and forgiven by God. The difference is that one is open to receiving that abundant love and one is not. The Pharisee’s prayer is more of a progress report: Dear God, just wanted you to know, I’m doing quite well thank you. I give more than I need to; I’m keeping the commandments; I’m well-regarded in the community. This is Pharisee signing off. The Pharisee asks nothing of God, and goes home with nothing.

On the other hand, there is the tax collector, a despicable fellow, a traitor to his community, making money off his neighbors to support the occupying Roman forces. For some reason, who knows why, this tax collector comes into the temple knowing he needs God’s love and mercy. He has done nothing to earn God’s love. He is not deserving of it. He just needs it, and asks for it. And he goes home aware of the abundant love flowing down on both himself and the Pharisee. But where the tax collector has

opened up his heart and allowed God's love and mercy to wash over him, the Pharisee has put up an umbrella of self-fulfillment, has cloaked himself in a bubble of self-sufficiency, and all of the love of God rains down on the righteous and unrighteous alike, just runs right off him.

This is a parable about God's abundant love for us, and about whether we're going to take off our raincoats and dance around in the rain, or whether we're going to try to keep ourselves dry and distant and unaffected.

The response to God's lavish love is to accept it, relish it, treasure it and find as many ways as we can to give it away, to live out the image of God stamped on every one of us, the image of a God of abundant love, to open our hands and hearts and stand in the stream of God's love and to use every means at our disposal to share this love with others. In church, we call this good stewardship.

In church, we practice *accepting* that love by greeting one another in the peace of the Lord. We practice *accepting* that love by gathering at God's table saying, we need this food. We practice *giving* that love by praying for people, some of whom we don't even know, but that they may know themselves to be bathed in the river of God's delight. We practice *giving* that love by making our offerings of ourselves through our money, our talents, our gifts. We practice *giving* that love by going forth from this place rejoicing in the power of the Spirit, to love and serve the Lord.

The Love that moves the sun and the stars, the Love that creates, sustains, and redeems the cosmos, is always uttering its eternal "Yes" to our question "Do you love me?" The only thing we need to do is open ourselves to that love. All self-flattery and self-importance and self-righteousness ends in futility. When we stop reciting our resumes in the temple, the incarnate love of God meets us and embraces us, saying, I know your pain, my beloved, and I forgive your sins. I know your emptiness and I will fill it and I will fill you with my Love. Amen.

The Rev. Dr. Amy Richter serves as Rector of St. Anne's Church in Annapolis, MD. She holds a PhD in New Testament from Marquette University and is the author of Enoch and the Gospel of Matthew. With her husband, the Rev. Dr. Joseph S. Pagano, she is co-author of Love in Flesh and Bone: Exploring the Christmas Mystery, and A Man, A Woman, a Word of Love.

Published by the Office of Formation of The Episcopal Church, 815 Second Avenue, New York, N.Y. 10017.

© 2016 The Domestic and Foreign Missionary Society of the Protestant Episcopal Church in the United States of America. All rights reserved.

ⁱ Jacqueline Syrup Bergan and S. Marie Schwan, *Freedom: A Guide to Prayer* (Winona, Minn.: St. Mary's Press, 1988), 12.