

“The Power of Endless Love”

Hosea 11:1-9

Romans 5:6-8

This is another sermon request. In fact, it came to me on a prayer card. Does that mean it's more than a request, maybe even a prayer? It reads: “I think a sermon from you on the power of endless love of Christ and of spouse, children, family would be special to me.”

The sermon in a nutshell is this: love is powerful because love is not about power; love is about giving up power, even to the point of sacrifice. As the choir sang, *The humble king they named a fraud and sacrificed the Lamb of God.*ⁱ Or as an ancient hymn incorporated into scripture sings, **“Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death – even death on a cross.”**ⁱⁱ

When you add the adjective *endless* to the noun *love*, you can only be talking about God's love and you have nothing short of resurrection. If we stay on the journey long enough, we will soon hear, “The Lord is risen! He is risen, indeed!” **“Therefore,”** as the ancient hymn continues, **“God also highly exalted [Christ] and gave him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.”**ⁱⁱⁱ

Henri Nouwen warns us about the irresistible temptation of claiming and holding on to power.

Maybe it is that power offers an easy substitute for the hard task of love. It seems easier to be God than to love God, easier to control people than to love people, easier to own life than to love life. Jesus asks, *Do you love me?* We ask [in turn], *Can we sit at your right hand and your left hand in your kingdom?*^{iv}

How typical of us! In a similar vein, Dostoevsky in *The Brothers Karamazov* writes,

At some thoughts one stands perplexed, above all at the sight of human sin, and wonders whether to combat it by force or by humble love. Always decide ‘I will combat it by humble love.’ If you resolve on that once for all, you can conquer the whole world. Loving humility is a terrible force: it is the strongest of all things, and there is nothing else like it.

But we really don't believe it. We are always tempted to replace love with power. Jesus did not succumb to that temptation. **“One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.” “Do not put the Lord your God to the test.” “Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him.”**^v Jesus did not combat sin by force. He combated it

by absorbing it into his very being. **“Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.”**^{vi}

Love does not claim prerogatives. Love does not pull strings. **“Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.”**^{vii} Hear those familiar words in another way: *Christ bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.* Theologian Douglas John Hall writes, “God’s problem is not that God is not able to do certain things. God’s problem is that God loves. Love complicates the life of God as it complicates every life.”^{viii}

Because love doesn’t pull strings, love is also painful, exceedingly so. You know that every time you lose someone you love, whether it be through death, a broken relationship or a physical separation for a period of time. Grief is the price we pay for loving. The deeper the love, the deeper the grief. It’s often said that the opposite of love is not hate, but apathy. If that is true, and I believe it is, then it’s easy to understand how love will ultimately bring pain. You can avoid a lot of pain in your life by not caring, by not loving, but look at the price you would have to pay to avoid pain!

*God is love [and] is enfolding
All the world in one embrace;
With unfailing grasp he’s holding
Every child of every race.
And when human hearts are breaking
Under sorrow’s iron rod,
All the sorrow, all the aching,
Wrings with pain the heart of God.*^{ix}

Nowhere do we hear more clearly about the pain love causes in God’s heart than in the prophet, Hosea. And at no time does the pain from loving cut deeper than when the beloved willfully spurns your love. One of the analogies Hosea uses to describe the relationship of God with his people is that of a parent and child. **“The Lord says, ‘Israel and Judah, what am I going to do with you? Your love for me disappears as quickly as morning mist; it is like dew, that vanishes early in the day.’”**^x God is so parental!!

“When Israel was only a child, I loved him. I called out, ‘My son!’—called him out of Egypt. But when others called him, he ran off and left me ... Still, I stuck with him ... I rescued him from human bondage, but he never acknowledged my help, never admitted that I was the one pulling his wagon, that I lifted him, like a baby, to my cheek, that I bent down to feed him.”^{xi} I know that Peterson’s translation is a bit over the top, but really no more so than God’s love for us.

Now if we were God, we would take the road most traveled. We’d turn go our Bible to guide us in what we should do. It’s right there in Deuteronomy: **“When a man has a stubborn son, a real rebel who won’t do a thing his mother and father tell him, and even though they**

discipline him he still won't obey, his father and mother shall forcibly bring him before the leaders at the city gate and say to the city fathers, 'This son of ours is a stubborn rebel; he won't listen to a thing we say. He's a glutton and a drunk.' Then all the men of the town are to throw rocks at him until he's dead. You will have purged the evil pollution from among you. All Israel will hear what's happened and be in awe."^{xii}

That's how we expect a real God to act, is it not? No more of this "pulling the child's wagon" or "cuddling her with your cheek" kind of talk. But that is precisely how the real God relates to us.

"How can I give up on you ... How can I turn you loose, Israel? ... I can't bear to even think such thoughts. My insides churn in protest. And so I'm not going to act on my anger ... and why? Because I am God and not a human. I'm The Holy One and I'm here—in your very midst."^{xiii}

Sounds like a dumb way to run a household, doesn't it? But have we not discovered by now that God's ways are not our ways, God's thoughts are not like our thoughts?^{xiv} Standing beneath the cross do we not yet understand that **"God's foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God's weakness is stronger than human strength?"**^{xv}

"Love never ends."^{xvi} It never gives up. That's why love is powerful and painful and even dangerous. A desire to love with a love that never gives up just might lure a woman into staying in an abusive marriage at all costs, when the more loving thing to do for herself and her children might be to leave the marriage before everyone destroys each other. It may deceive parents into thinking they should their prodigal children everything they want. Nowhere, however, does it say that love is about indulgence, or about jeopardizing your physical safety when there are other options. At times love requires you to say "it's over" or "no you can't." Love sometimes has to be tough.

God's love never ends, never gives up. If you love God you'll want to love others as God loves you. You want to be ready to bear, believe, hope and endure all things. You hope that those moments of saying "it's over" or "no you can't" are few and far between. But we are not God and our love for others, and the love we receive from them, always pales when compared to God's love in Christ Jesus our Lord. We always need to seek God's forgiveness and to appropriate that forgiveness by forgiving ourselves because our love is far from perfect. And we always need to be forgiving of those whose love we desire because they cannot love us with a perfect love either.

Our best efforts just don't add up, but I'd like to show you some arithmetic that does add up. If you use e-mail, you probably receive at least one or more jokes or stories every day. I get so many that I can't possibly pay attention to them all, but one got my attention. There's not time for you to check the arithmetic so please trust me. It's accurate.

$$\begin{aligned}
1 \times 8 + 1 &= 9 \\
12 \times 8 + 2 &= 98 \\
123 \times 8 + 3 &= 987 \\
1234 \times 8 + 4 &= 9876 \\
12345 \times 8 + 5 &= 98765 \\
123456 \times 8 + 6 &= 987654 \\
1234567 \times 8 + 7 &= 9876543 \\
12345678 \times 8 + 8 &= 98765432 \\
123456789 \times 8 + 9 &= 987654321
\end{aligned}$$

$$\begin{aligned}
1 \times 9 + 2 &= 11 \\
12 \times 9 + 3 &= 111 \\
123 \times 9 + 4 &= 1111 \\
1234 \times 9 + 5 &= 11111 \\
12345 \times 9 + 6 &= 111111 \\
123456 \times 9 + 7 &= 1111111 \\
1234567 \times 9 + 8 &= 11111111 \\
12345678 \times 9 + 9 &= 111111111 \\
123456789 \times 9 + 10 &= 1111111111
\end{aligned}$$

$$\begin{aligned}
9 \times 9 + 7 &= 88 \\
98 \times 9 + 6 &= 888 \\
987 \times 9 + 5 &= 8888 \\
9876 \times 9 + 4 &= 88888 \\
98765 \times 9 + 3 &= 888888 \\
987654 \times 9 + 2 &= 8888888 \\
9876543 \times 9 + 1 &= 88888888 \\
98765432 \times 9 + 0 &= 888888888
\end{aligned}$$

Brilliant, isn't it?

And look at this symmetry:

$$\begin{aligned}
1 \times 1 &= 1 \\
11 \times 11 &= 121 \\
111 \times 111 &= 12321 \\
1111 \times 1111 &= 1234321 \\
11111 \times 11111 &= 123454321 \\
111111 \times 111111 &= 12345654321 \\
1111111 \times 1111111 &= 1234567654321 \\
11111111 \times 11111111 &= 123456787654321 \\
111111111 \times 111111111 &= 12345678987654321
\end{aligned}$$

Now, take a look at this...101%
From a strictly mathematical viewpoint:
What Equals 100%?

What does it mean to give MORE than 100%?
Ever wonder about those people who say they are giving more than 100%?

We have all been in situations where someone wants you to

GIVE OVER 100%.
How about ACHIEVING 101%?

What equals 100% in life?

Here's a little mathematical formula that might help answer these questions:

If:
A B C D E F G H I J K L M N O P Q R S T U V W X Y Z
is represented as:
1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 11 12 13 14 15 16 17 18 19 20 21 22 23 24 25 26.

If:
H-A-R-D-W-O-R-K
 $8+1+18+4+23+15+18+11 = 98\%$

And:
K-N-O-W-L-E-D-G-E
 $11+14+15+23+12+5+4+7+5 = 96\%$

But:
A-T-T-I-T-U-D-E
 $1+20+20+9+20+21+4+5 = 100\%$

THEN, look how far the love of God will take you:

L-O-V-E-O-F-G-O-D
 $12+15+22+5+15+6+7+15+4 = 101\%$

Therefore, one can conclude with mathematical certainty that:
While Hard Work and Knowledge will get you close,
and Attitude will get you there,
it's the Love of God that will put you over the top

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- i. From the choir's anthem for the day, *Lamb of God* by Twila Paris
 - ii. Philippians 2:6-8
 - iii. Philippians 2:9-11
 - iv. Matthew 20:21; *Mornings with Henri J. M. Nouwen*, quoted in Christianity Today, 2/8/99, p. 72
 - v. Jesus' responses in the Temptation Story, Matthew 4:1-11
 - vi. John 1:29
 - vii. 1 Corinthians 13:7
 - viii. *God and Human Suffering: An Exercise in the Theology of the Cross*, (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1986), p. 156
 - ix. From the hymn, *God Is Love: Let Heaven Adore Him*, Timothy Rees (1874-1939); #386 in The Worshipbook, (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1970)
 - x. Hosea 6:4 (*Good News Bible*)
 - xi. Hosea 11:1-4 (*The Message*)
 - xii. Deuteronomy 21:18-21 (*The Message*)
 - xiii. Hosea 11:8-9 (*The Message*)
 - xiv. Isaiah 55:8
 - xv. 1 Corinthians 1:25
 - xvi. 1 Corinthians 13:8