

## WHY DO YOU LOVE ME?

A friend of mine once suggested this topic for a sermon: If Christ were to appear to me, how would He answer my query, “Why do you love me?” Hence, today’s sermon title.

The experience of the saints so far is that when Christ appears to us, He doesn’t answer many questions. He asks them – and it sends us into new Life and purpose. Sometimes we deduce afterwards that a motive of love and caring was behind it. It’s interesting that we want to imagine that we will be in control and in charge, even in our conversations with Christ. In real life, if you get into a conversation with Christ and you are in control, you know you are making it up.

But today we will imagine the unimaginable and pretend that we have caught Jesus – God, the Holy Spirit, Christ – in a quiet moment with little going on and nothing on the agenda. We are invited to ask our questions, so we ask, “Why do you love me?”

If your spouse, your child, or your best friend suddenly turned to you and asked “Why do you love me?” – what would *you* reply? Not an easy question. No answer feels adequate. That’s because answers are linear and intellectual, and love goes way beyond them. How much is two angels, three humans, a child, a dog, and two horses? Seventy-four? Seventy-three and a half? We aren’t making it, are we? This sermon will necessarily fiddle around on the edges of the subject. I cannot help that. This is not due to my unwillingness; it is simply the nature of the question. The question “why” and the concept of “love” have *never* gone together.

A beautiful young woman with an excellent education and a broad cultural background falls in love with a young man from “the other side of the tracks.” His family is dirt-poor, his speech is sometimes ungrammatical, and he is going to night school to finish his high school degree. The young woman’s father and mother ask, “Why!? What did we do wrong? Why would you pick this man to fall in love with?” *Love* and *why* do not go together.

The elder brother comes in from the fields to find a great celebration going on for his younger, wastrel brother. The father has been weeping and dancing for joy, and there is something about a fatted calf and a ring for his finger. The elder brother says to his father, “Why?!

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Why love this no-account prodigal brother of mine when he treated us so shamefully, and I have been so obedient and faithful?” *Love* and *why* do not go together.

Why does God move Heaven and earth to free the Israelite slaves from Egypt? Why has God been freeing slaves from Africa, Siam, America, and everywhere else in the world ever since? Why does God hate slavery and every other form of bondage? If we pay any attention to our Scriptures or to history, we know for certain now that wherever slavery or bondage exists in the world, God is already at work to break it – and that if we are trying to maintain or defend it, we are working against God. *Love* and *why* do not go together.

“How do you know when you have fallen in love?” asks the sweet young thing.

“If you are still wondering, you haven’t,” replies the old seer.

“But how will I know?” insists the young one.

“When the question is no longer relevant and you go for it no matter what it requires, then you have fallen in love,” replies the seer.

*Love* and *why* do not go together.

So the question is impossible. But that’s okay. It is a wonderful question, and we love to ask why.

### I.) DISTRUST AND MISTRUST (this question has a dark side)

One of the reasons we ask questions is because we have suspicious natures. When she flutters her eyelashes and looks innocently into your eyes and asks “Do you love me?” or “Why do you love me?” – you better realize that she would not ask the question if she did not have some doubts. She hopes the answer, however poor or inadequate, will reassure her. But something is causing her to wonder. If you know for sure that you are loved, you do not ask “Why do you love me?”

Humans are never deeply and finally certain that God loves them, not even that God in Christ Jesus loves them. So one of the problems with this question is that it touches on our deepest fears: Maybe God does not love us. Maybe there is no God or meaning or purpose. Or worse, maybe God despises us, and it is only our wishful thinking

that God loves us. If we do not know or cannot face that dimension of the question, then the question itself, and all the answers we may play with, only mock us.

Why does God create us? Is God lonely? Does God need the cheap labor? Is God bored and we are his version of Tinker Toys? All these thoughts, and endless variations on them, have been proposed and taken very seriously by some. For many years, I found myself fascinated with what is called “science fiction.” But I read a lot of science fiction before I began to realize that much of it was more theological fiction than science fiction. For a while, back in the '60s, I thought science fiction writers were doing better theology than the seminaries. Over and over and over, the theme was repeated: Some alien force or civilization was trying to invade our planet, either to enslave us or destroy us. Obviously they were vastly superior to us or they would never have reached us. Nevertheless, by hook or by crook, by blind luck, or by sheer stubborn refusal to give up, we would narrowly escape being taken over. Finally I began to realize that this was a thinly veiled, primordial fear of conversion. God and his angels – aliens, advanced far beyond us – keep trying to invade our world, and we fight with every ounce of our beings to keep from succumbing to the divine influence ... because we do not trust it.

One story, for instance, was called “How To Serve Man.” This time the aliens came so gently, and did so many favors for us, that slowly the world was won over. Poverty was eliminated. Abundant energy was provided. Ecology problems were solved. Disease was conquered. After a few years, humans found themselves living in a virtual Garden of Eden. The aliens, now accepted as true and magnificent benefactors, invited humans to come visit their planet. Eagerly, people signed up for the journey. Meanwhile, a lone linguist, struggling to learn the language of the aliens, pieced together enough symbols that he could begin to read. He discovered that the manual the aliens carried was titled “How To Serve Man.” It was inspiring that this alien species had come so far, just to do good. A week later, his language skills were improved enough for him to realize that the manual was a cookbook. (Humans were healthy, sleek, dumb sheep being led to the slaughter.)

That’s not just a clever story. Lots of people secretly fear that God has ulterior motives. They say things like, “There’s no such thing as a free lunch.” Or, “Grace is for suckers.” The more we talk about God’s

love, the more they guard their backsides. They may trust a deal that brings mutual benefit to both parties, but as far as *love* is concerned, that's just a word people use in order to get what they want – God included. Or so many people believe.

“Fezenden’s World” was another science fiction story. Fezenden was an atomic physicist and, instead of setting up a model train in his basement, he had constructed a miniature universe. He had the atoms highly magnified and spinning about in miniature solar systems. He had learned to create conditions suitable for life, and in a few weeks his little solar systems would evolve much as ours has over vast geological ages. So Fezenden would come home after a hard day’s work, go into his basement, and see how his worlds were developing and getting along. And he would amuse himself by manipulating things a little bit. He would cause a famine on one world, just to see how they would react. He would push the sun a little closer or a little farther away, to see how the inhabitants would respond. With his laser, he would nudge an asteroid into a collision path, to see if the citizens of that planet could react and cooperate fast enough to save their planet. And sometimes in anger or weariness or sadness, he would destroy a system, and perhaps build a new one in its place the next day.

It’s not sound Christian theology, but many *have* wondered: Is God just playing with us? No personal concern one way or the other, just experimenting?

Many groups and even whole religions have presumed that Creation reflects a huge battle between darkness and light, between good and evil, between life and death. “*Thus says the LORD: ‘Behold, I set before you the way of life and the way of death.’*” (Jeremiah 21:8; Deuteronomy 30:19) In some of those religions, the powers of darkness and the powers of light are more evenly matched than Christianity believes, and the good God is desperate for humans to side with him and help to turn the tide. And just as clearly, if enough humans side with evil, the battle will be lost. That is, of course, the theology behind most Westerns and a great many of our best mythology and adventure stories.

Why does God love us? A huge segment of humanity over the centuries would reply, “Well, I’m not sure, but I don’t trust him. God probably needs us, or wants to use us in ways that aren’t being mentioned or admitted.”

At the very least, we should admit that love is not provable. There is evidence of love, but it is never certain; it is never beyond the shadow of a doubt. This is the Christian Faith, not the Christian Fact. Concluding that God loves us is a leap of faith – and not many people jump very far, or the world would be filled with saints and every church would be full of love and light. Christianity is something we bet our lives on, not something we can consider a proven fact. Becoming Christians is like trying to run a new business, not like suddenly having stocks and bonds stuck away somewhere in a safe-deposit box.

We should also admit that God's love is not easily or automatically evident, even though our culture keeps trying to pretend it is. Nature is red in tooth and claw. Big things eat little things. People you know and love get sick and die; lose their jobs; get abandoned by their mates; have children that are defective in some way, sometimes in ways that do not show up for years. It is not easily or automatically obvious that God loves us. At the very least, we would have to say that God is a hard taskmaster. For forty years, I have been in churches from coast to coast and from north to south, and I have never yet met a person who had an easy life. Is it just our denomination? I have *thought* that some people had it easy, at first glance, until I got to know them. In any case, the coming of Jesus Christ – His life and death and resurrection, and the whole faith history out of which He comes – is set over against a vast human experience of pain and evil, of struggle and hurt, of fear and disillusionment. It is not easily or automatically obvious that God loves us. That may not seem to have any direct bearing on the question, "Why does God love us?" But it is the setting and the context in which we ask the question, and it has enormous influence on how we hear any comments or answers to the question.

### II.) THE CLASSIC ANSWER

The classic answer, and the best answer to our question, is not a true answer. We always try to reduce things down to something we can understand, or think we can understand. A mother's love for her child is the great analogy. A father's love is close beside it. "*Our Father, who art in Heaven ....*" *Abba*, Father – Daddy. God creates us, and so God loves us like a mother or father loves a child. Today we would probably add that we get to choose which father or mother is used to illustrate the point. Nevertheless, we know a host of fathers and mothers whose love for their children is vast, sacrificial, and, from all we can tell,

endless. It seems to have little to do with whether the children are worthy or unworthy, at least at any given moment in time. The love does not seem to be dependent upon whether the children are responsive, thankful, respectful, or high-achievers. That, we say, is the way God loves his children too. “Why do you love me?” I am your true and heavenly parent – your Creator.

It is not a true answer. That is, if you ask the parent, “Why do you love your children this much?” they simply reply that this is the case – this is the way it is between parents and their children. Just so between our Creator and us.

Why does a boy love his dog? Why does a girl love her horse? Even the best answers leave out the most important dimension. *Why* and *love* do not go together. All we know is that if you press humans long enough and hard enough, you get dramatic evidence: sacrifice, loyalty, endurance, caring – even unto death. If you press God long enough and hard enough, you get a Cross.

The answer is: He does! The answer is not in *why* – the answer is *He loves us*.

How do we know that Jesus was Japanese? Because He loves miso. Not the classic answer, not the intellectual answer, but the true answer is: He does love us! *Why* Christ loves you is answered in the reality of His love, not in the intellect of the question. That is, an answer about love is an answer about how one lives, not what one says. Love can only be answered by life, not by words. I remind you of the story of Saul of Tarsus, who became the Apostle Paul:

Saul is arresting Christians, persecuting Christians, and killing Christians for blasphemy. That is, he is doing it in defense of true religion, as he understands it, and in loyalty and zeal for what he believes is the real truth. From Saul’s perspective, Christians are a threat to Judaism and are the enemies of God and true faith. So the encounter on the Damascus Road is one of the most powerful and clarifying moments in our tradition. Saul’s intentions are very faithful; therefore Jesus has a right to confront him – that is, the encounter does not break Saul’s free will. It is still mind-boggling to Saul. The light flashes and the voice says, “*Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?*”

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First of all, Saul is known and called by name. Second, it is obvious that the persecution is a terrible mistake *and* that Saul would not be doing it if he understood. Third, it is clear that Saul's persecution of Christians *is* the persecution of Jesus. "Touching them touches me."

Saul is shaken to the very roots of his being. He is shaken because this experience has made it clear to him that he is fighting against and hurting God – the exact reverse of what he was trying to do. It is one of the worst experiences in life to discover that right where we are trying to do the most good, we are doing the most harm – that exactly what we are most proud of is in fact our worst sin. But Saul is shaken even more by the realization that, having been so wrong, he is still *not* forsaken, *not* hated, *not* punished. Corrected, yes – but not punished. In fact, he is given a huge and very important assignment: He is to be Jesus' apostle to the Gentiles. That is, at the very moment of apprehension – at the moment when he is most wrong – Saul has the experience of being accepted, valued, and respected, and he is to be trusted with a most important task. In short, he is loved! And he never forgets it. It changes his life forever. And we should remember that Saul has never heard Paul preach. He is experiencing the Gospel for the first time, but he has never heard it. This is nothing like anything he ever expected! It comes as a total surprise.

A few days later, Saul gets a second hit. A man named Ananias shows up at the house where Saul is staying. Ananias is a Christian. Therefore, he has knowingly walked into the lion's den, coming of his own accord to the house where Saul, the killer of Christians, is staying. Ananias addresses him as "Saul, my brother." And Ananias lays his hands on Saul and heals his blindness. Several things must be clicking through Saul's mind: This man is courageous enough to come. He knows that Saul has been changed. He has the power to heal. He accepts Saul as a brother without evidence or demonstration of any kind. There is no way under Heaven that Ananias could or would know or do any of this – unless he was in contact with the same Being who had encountered Saul on the Damascus Road. The human touch matches the divine touch. How critical that is. And it was enough for the hard-nosed, adamant Saul of Tarsus. He rose and was baptized.

Love changed him. Love broke his heart. And love filled it again with something much bigger. Why? *Why* and *love* do not go together. *Why* looks for a reason, and *why* always comes up with something lower

than love. Paul turned out to be very useful; maybe Jesus was just being pragmatic and effective. That answer might satisfy some people. But it wouldn't even register with Paul. *He knew himself loved.* It was an enormous surprise. The rest of his life was a response. And yes, Paul loved Jesus back. Shall we ask, "Why did Paul love Him back?" That gets us nowhere as well. Paul lost his relatives and friends, at least for a while, and ended up hated by most of the nation he loved. He was beaten, stoned, exiled, shipwrecked, imprisoned over and over, and finally executed. Why did he love Jesus back? What did it get him? *Why* is too small a question for *love*. Paul had complaints, but none of them were about his relationship with Jesus.

### III. MY ANSWER

That is the end of the sermon. That is what I think we need to know and think about in the face of this excellent and fascinating question. Now I will tell you my own answer. I don't know if it's important or in any way right. By necessity, I will make it a little more generic than Jesus would. If you asked Jesus, "Why do you love me?" – He would say things I have never imagined. But I believe He would also say this to you:

It is my nature to love, and I love all that I have created. But I also love you – you personally, specially, and in ways I love no other. In part, I love you because you have wonderful qualities that I admire and respect. You are courageous and creative. You care deeply about many things and many people. I love your passion, and I love it that when you make a mistake, nobody can pretend it did not happen or that it does not have to be dealt with. And when you do something wonderful, it is that same way then too. You are full of life and eager to learn, and I love you for that. I love you for being so mature and wise and childlike, all at the same time. Beyond that, and all your marvelous qualities, there are many dimensions to your identity and purpose that I see and know which you are not fully aware of. I love you for those also, and I am eager to watch them grow and develop as your life unfolds. I even want to be part of that, and helpful to that unfolding. And I love you because I know we are a great team together. I am eager for that to go on and keep getting better for more millennium than your mind can fathom. Mostly we stay in the "now" and live one day at a time, but I see your true identity much clearer than you do, and I know what you were created to accomplish beyond anything I can tell you in this moment. And besides, even if I did start it, I also love you for loving me.