



St. Stephen's Traditional Episcopal Church

11856 Mays Chapel Rd., Timonium, MD 21093

The Fourth Sunday in Lent, March 18th, 2007

✠ In The Name of The Father and of The Son
and of The Holy Ghost. Amen. ✠

“Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart and with all thy soul and with all thy mind and with all thy strength.” Part I

In a culture where Christian faith comes with little cost, and where it is still relatively respectable to own the name of Christ we may be very unclear about what it really means to love the Lord our God. It is easy to hide behind a facade of tradition and avoid any real or authentic commitment of faith.

We live in a culture where things spiritual have been relegated to the realm of the private. It's taken for granted that everyone will find their own way to whatever gods may be. People resent being put on the spot when it comes to questions of faith. Faith belongs in a safe religious ghetto where it can't affect or touch anything. That is as far removed from the biblical definition of a Christian as it is possible to be.

Today, I'm going to start a new sermon series. I want to ask what it means to be a lover of God. What does this look like? Love is presented today as something sentimental and flabby. That's not the love of which the Bible speaks. Biblical love is strong. It is stronger than death. It outlives death. When spiritual gifts are silenced, says Paul, love continues. Faith, hope, love—these three, but the greatest of these is love. There is, in fact, nothing stronger than love.

Those of us who care deeply about orthodox thinking and defending the truths of the word of God can fall into the error of putting knowledge as the primary thing. Truth is very important, especially today. The very concept of truth is under assault today. The Bible urges us to defend and champion the truth. What we must not let ourselves forget, however, is that while knowledge puffeth up love buildeth up. We can have all the truth, embrace the

doctrines of the word of God, and understand theology and learning but be as dry as it is possible to be.

True Christian knowledge is rooted and grounded in love. It breathes the air of love because the subject of our knowing is love. Christianity is personal. It is not the knowledge of an idea or a thing, but a relationship with a person. It is a response of personality to personality.

Jonathan Edwards wrote, “True religion consists in the affections, and there can be no true religion without them.” The engagement of the heart, he wrote, is “the most excellent, the most necessary, and essential thing of all, without which all that makes the most glittering show in religion is nothing...”

This is true for every aspect of the Christian faith. The law of God is the law of love. Love is the fulfilling of the law. We can only conceive of holiness and the holy life in terms of love. This is the primary thing. My friends, to be a Christian is to love God, delighting in him for himself. The Christian finds God perfectly lovely. He glories in God's holiness, character and nature.

Up to this point most people would feel quite comfortable. There is something noble about the idea of loving God. But there is a problem, and it emerges when you begin defining the God we are to love. You see, we are not talking about loving a generic, faceless God with no name. This is the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob of which we speak, the God of the psalms and prophets. The God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.

People are comfortable with the idea of loving God until you move out of the generic and begin to get specific about the God we are called to love. That's where it gets difficult. That is when objections rise. You see, men and women may talk of loving God but what they have in mind is a generic god of their own making. Man is born in a state of enmity against

God. By nature he is hostile to God and the claims of God. He is not subject to the law of man, nor can be. People will say they believe in God and worship God. They always have. Anthropologists and psychologists talk of the religious instinct. It's reflected in the most ancient art work going back to the earliest beginnings of the human journey. What is clear, however, is that the God people worship is not the God of the Bible.

Men and women will invariably reject the God of the Bible. Their natural instinct is to reject the revelation of Scripture. When our first parents fell and sin entered the human race a fundamental animosity toward God entered with it. Men and women do not love God. They are opposed to him. They are dead in trespasses and sins. This is true even of your so-called moral man, your naturally religious man. Once you move out of the generic and into the specific revelation of who God is a natural and immediate and inevitable hostility arises.

What we are discussing here is loving God as God has revealed himself. The Christian hungers and thirsts after his righteousness. He delights in God's law. He says with John in the fifth chapter of John's first epistle, 'His commands are not burdensome.' This is the supreme test. This shows whether or not we are Christians, whether or not our Christian faith goes beyond profession to real and actual possession of spiritual life.

Man according to nature may be a student of life and of religion. He may be prepared to investigate the claims of Christ. He may think that the Bible is worthy of consideration, worthy of his examination, worthy of the use of his critical faculties. But it is all intellectual. He finds the fact that intelligent people believe the claims and teaching of the Bible quite astonishing. He may have a moral philosophy which includes the Bible to some degree. But the key is loving God on his own terms—loving God as God has made himself known.

This is the mark of the Christian. He loves the Lord God with all his heart, soul, mind, and strength—not all in the sense of perfection or completion (we will not arrive there until we see him face to face, and are completely free from the presence of sin)—no, it's all in the sense of every part of, every aspect of. There's no compartmentalizing, no cordoning God and religion off in this part of our lives but not that part—the private but not the public aspects of life; church but not business, and so on. God is in every aspect of their lives, and the more mature they are the more this is true of them.

This is what it means to be filled with all the fullness of God. God has their hearts, their lives, their minds which are humbled before him. He has

their bodies. Every aspect of their lives is yielded to him. That is what it means to be filled with the Spirit. God is first in their thoughts, first in their desires. And as they grow this grows more and more real, this becomes more and more intense. That's God's desire for us. Give me thine heart, he says. Give me your life and body and soul.

It is a noble and a glorious calling to be a child of the Father. We take the privilege too lightly. We can live almost oblivious to how grand it is to be called to love in this way. Indeed, we are so prone to forget that sometimes we need a stark reminder of the implications of saying we are lovers of God.

Every day the pressures of life conspire to pull us away from our noble obligation to be lovers of God. "The natural shocks that flesh is heir to" may cause fellowship and worship to become sporadic and prayer to slide. It's easy to forget to read the Scriptures, even easier to procrastinate on studying them. Do the things you did at first, said Jesus to this church.

Return to those things that defined you when first you saw the Lord. Arouse the craving that once sent you to your face before God and caused your life to be dominated by priorities your friends found difficult to comprehend. Return to first things, and experience once more that deep, energy-giving, life-giving love that once reduced you to tears at the sound of Jesus' name.

The song writer described love as a many-sided thing. We want to examine those different sides. The love of the heart, which are the affections of the mind; the love of the soul, or of the life, which is made visible in obedience to the word of God; the love of the mind, which are the joys and pleasures of knowing God; and, the love of physical strength, the love that is expressed in all our engagements in this world.

This is the first and primary test. There may be other tests one might apply to determine if indeed we are truly children of God, but this is the infallible one. If this is not true then whatever else may be said of a person their profession of faith is in serious doubt. This is what is true of the person who has been justified by faith in the finished work of God in Jesus Christ. And to the degree they are growing in grace and in the knowledge of God that love is increasing and growing in the heart, and in the soul, mind and strength. It will last when everything fades away. May it be so.

To the Only Wise God, Our Saviour, be Glory and Majesty, Dominion and Power, Both Now and Forever. AMEN.