

A Love that Knows No Bounds By Holly C. W. Aastuen
April 18, 2010 John 21:1-19

The 50 year old man in the hospital bed had suffered a slight heart attack but now was doing well enough to be out of Intensive Care. Though no family had been around him throughout the ordeal, when the nurse went in to check on him he hesitantly and tearfully asked her to call his daughter. "Tell her I've had a heart attack. A slight one. You see, she is the only family I have." Before the nurse left to make the call the man asked for pencil and paper which she left for him on the bedside table.

When she called the daughter and gave her the news the daughter screamed, "No! He's not dying is he?" When the nurse reassured her that his condition was stable, the daughter continued, "You must not let him die! My dad and I haven't spoken in almost a year. We had a terrible argument on my 21st birthday, over my boyfriend. The last thing I said to him was, 'I hate you.'"

Her voice cracked and she began to sob.

When she caught her breath she said, "I'm coming over. I'll be there in 30 minutes."

The nurse went back to check on the man and give him the news, and found him lying unmoving. She reached for his pulse and found none.

As she gave the code over the intercom the team came flying. They did everything they could do to get his heart started again but to no avail. After a long period of trying they stopped. He was dead.

When the nurse found the daughter, the doctor was telling her the news.

Later when the daughter and the nurse went in to see her father, the nurse noticed a scrap of paper on the bedside table. On it was this note: 'My dearest Janie, I forgive you. I pray you will also forgive me. I know that you love me. I love you too. Daddy

As the daughter read it, the tormented look she had had on her face grew radiant. The guilt and pain and anguish she was carrying from that last year, that year of estrangement, melted away. Peace began to glisten in her eyes. She hugged the scrap of paper to her chest. (from Guideposts Magazine, 1979)

"Simon son of John, do you love me more than these?"

Jesus asked this question as they sat on the beach. Peter had, just days earlier, denied even knowing Jesus. Peter said to him, "Yes, Lord; you know that I love you."

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A second time Jesus said to him, "Simon son of John, do you love me?" He said to him, "Yes, Lord; you know that I love you." He said to him the third time, "Simon son of John, do you love me?" Peter felt hurt because he said to him the third time, "Do you love me?" And he said to him, "Lord, you know everything; you know that I love you." Jesus said to him, "Feed my sheep."

Some of us here today in this room can't believe that we are loved. Sometimes we don't believe that anyone could love us, especially when we've done something to betray that love, if we've done something to severely harm the relationship. The way we hurt those we love, the way we deny even being a part of their lives makes us sure that no one could ever love us, especially when we're painfully aware of how flawed and imperfect we are.

And yet despite all that, we are loved.

In this, Jesus' third appearance to his disciples, he asks Peter repeatedly about his love for Jesus not because he was putting Peter through some kind of test, but because he loved him.

Of all the disciples left in the fold, Peter was carrying the greatest burden, the most difficult load. Judas had betrayed Jesus and found the burden so heavy that he killed himself. Peter carried the great burden of having denied his Jesus three times and though he wept bitterly when he realized what he had done, he was still carrying that grief, that pain of having turned his back when Jesus had needed him the most. The memory and weight of his denials created a barrier between Peter and Jesus and Jesus had come this third time to the disciples to break that barrier down

"Simon, son of John, do you love me more than these?"

It wasn't primarily a question of priorities. It wasn't even a question of Peter's love. Jesus knew Peter loved him wholeheartedly, Jesus knew that Peter's priority in life was to love Jesus and love God with all his heart and soul and mind and strength. The reason Jesus asked basically the same question three times was to erase, one at a time, the three denials Peter had uttered earlier. Just as he had, over a week ago, said, "I do not know the man," he was now saying, "I love you" the same number of times and with the same fervor with which he had earlier denied him.

Have you ever done something so terrible, so seemingly unforgiveable that the weight of what you had done is bringing you down? Have you ever felt so guilty about something that you can't imagine that anyone would ever forgive you? All of us have something from our past that we wish would stay firmly lodged in the past. But often these things pop up again and again in our memory,

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relentlessly reminding us of what we have done and how we have fallen short of being the person we want to be.

When I was growing up, if you did something wrong you said, "I'm sorry I did that." And in our family the response was always, "It's OK." Or "Don't worry about it."

The first time I made some mistake with my husband, probably about two minutes after first meeting him, I made the standard apology, "I'm sorry." And he replied, "I forgive you."

At first I was surprised—he didn't say the right thing—he was supposed to say, 'It's OK.' But instead he offered me forgiveness. I found myself getting a little miffed, indignant even, that he would presume to forgive me. Forgiveness was reserved for those big things—spreading nasty rumors, breaking the family china or backing the car over the garbage can—not the little things like whatever it was I was apologizing for.

It wasn't until years later that I realized we could all use a little more forgiveness in our lives. We could all afford to hear ourselves forgiven for whatever wrong we had committed, no matter how small. Forgiveness is real and irreversible. It gives us a clean slate and the opportunity to move on without being haunted by the past.

But forgiveness has with it a promise as well, the promise that the one doing the forgiving is not done with us but wants to continue in relationship, wants the relationship to grow with no debts interfering with the relationship.

Not only did Jesus' forgiveness of Peter erase any debt he may have felt toward Jesus, it also gave him direction for the way forward--'feed my lambs, tend my sheep, feed my sheep,' Jesus said. In other words: encourage people, help the poor, believe the abused, give those who are seeking some substantial ways to learn more about God.

Hatred and fear put Jesus on the cross, but love took him down so that we wouldn't remain forever condemned for such a horrendous act. The resurrection is, among other things, a sign of forgiveness, that those who put Jesus on the cross are not eternally condemned, for Christ is risen! Even those, who in fear put him on the cross, are forgiven. Even those who got caught up in the fervor of the crowd and yelled, "Crucify!" are forgiven. Even those of us who have done things that have hurt others are forgiven and loved.

Bishop Reuben Job writes: "As I drove up the driveway, our children raced out the front door and met me at the car. Before I could get my suitcase out of the

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car, they were telling me about Puddles, the dog that had followed them home from the little store a few blocks away. We had talked nearly every day about the dog we were going to get when we were able to move into the country. Everyone wanted a big dog like a Dalmatian or a black Labrador. But as I got out of the car I noticed a dog that was small and scraggly, of mixed origin, very soon to be a mother, and yet very personable. The chorus of affirmation for the dog from our children was compelling. But I gave no clear answer to their question, 'Can we keep Puddles?' I did not want to adopt a dog like this, and I knew I had to move quickly to make sure we did not have a dog and a litter of puppies on our hands.

"I suggested that after our evening meal and our chores were completed we would talk about what to do with the dog. Later, when we were all settled in the family room, and with the dog in the garage, I asked each of the children to tell me why he or she thought we should keep Puddles when we could get a beautiful and large dog. Each of them had a good reason. She needed a home. We would enjoy the puppies. She would be a watchdog. Last I turned to our eight-year-old son and asked him what we should do with the dog and why. His eyes filled with tears and he said, 'We should keep her.' I asked him for his reason why we should keep this scraggly dog. He responded through his tears, 'Because she loves me.' We kept Puddles. She was with us while our children grew up and when they called home from college and career, their first question was always, 'How is Puddles?' She lived with us seventeen years because one little boy loved her enough to save her."

Jesus loves us enough to save us—to save us from old wrongs, to save us from old hurts, to save us from ourselves. Jesus knows everything about us and yet he loves us and forgives us.

I pray that each of us can understand and experience that love God has for us so that we know and embrace that love. God forgives all wrongs and breaks down all barriers so that we may grow and flourish in the assurance of God's never-failing love.