

God's Love: A 'Yes' That Conquers Our 'No'

From the Lenten sermon series: Love Story

Text: Corinthians 15:21, 22, 28

Richard A. Rhem
Christ Community Church
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Transcription of the spoken sermon

Has our Lenten experience convinced us that the universal human response to God is "No"? Have we faced the issue squarely? Have we come to see that the crucifixion of Jesus was not an aberration, an exception to the rule of the way of human history? Have we come to see that there is more of Caiaphas and the dignitaries of the Sanhedrin in us, in our religious institutional selves, than of Jesus? Have we come to see that there is more of Pilate in us, in our national identity as Americans, than of Jesus? Have we come to see the human situation is hopeless?

I hope so.

That is not just pulpit talk intended to beat you down. It is an honest conclusion reached on the basis of the whole tragic tale of human history. Power politics, coercion, oppression, injustice resulting in human suffering, helplessness, fear, despair, the violence of terrorism perpetrated by those who have nothing to lose. That is the human story.

In the biblical narrative, Israel's history is not just one history among others; it is a special history because Israel was a specially chosen people living in the light of God's revelation - a representative people on behalf of all people. God's purpose in calling Abraham and Sarah and from them forming a special people, was not to leave the rest in their alienation and darkness, but, rather, that Israel might be a light to the nations and that all nations might come to Mount Zion to learn God's Law - the Torah - the way of life.

But it was not to be. The story of God's special relationship with Israel - the Covenant of Grace - was the story of a broken covenant and that history ended in deadlock, impasse. It was obvious that Israel would not be the historical demonstration of God's Kingdom as God intended.

During our Lenten biblical journey we have reviewed the one story of the Bible. In Genesis 1-11, the first section of biblical narrative dealing with the great universal themes of creation, humankind, judgment and grace, we saw at least once that God brought judgment and started over.

Remember the story of Noah and the Flood? Did not God begin again with righteous Noah? But it was to no avail.

And then, as I just mentioned, the call to Abraham was a new beginning, a new strategy, through the one to win the many. But the result was dismal.

Finally, when it seemed hopeless, God loved the world so much that God gave a Son - Jesus. John's Gospel has given us our series' theme - God loved the world so much that God gave... From the first letter of John we heard those simple and profound words,

"God is love. And God's love was disclosed to us in this, that God sent his only son into the world to bring us life."

We followed the story of Jesus which reached its climax this week past. He entered Jerusalem amid the clamor of the Passover pilgrim crowd, hoping he would be the national liberator, and Friday we remembered his death by crucifixion. He had come in God's name; he had proclaimed God's Kingdom; he had fully followed the will of God as he understood it, even when it was leading inevitably to his death. He did not swerve from the course, although he pursued it with fear and trembling.

And he died.

Jesus, the revelation of God, the one righteous person ever to live, the disclosure of God's radical love, crucified. Love is vulnerable and crucified in history because history is not about love; it is about power and coercion and oppression.

Jesus was crucified.

But, that death, rather than the tragic end to a noble vision, was perceived and proclaimed as the supreme demonstration of God's love and in that death God's love is seen in all its radicality. The death of Jesus has become the proclamation of the most radical love possible - God's love for the ungodly, for God's enemies.

*God demonstrated His love for us in that while we were yet sinners,
Christ died for us.*

But, the death of Jesus as the supreme disclosure of God's love redeeming the world was not evident on Good Friday. Darkness covered the earth as Jesus died, symbolic darkness - for the crucifixion of Jesus by Jerusalem and Rome, by Caiaphas, the High Priest, and Pilate, the Roman official, representing the whole

world, was the final human “No” to God, to God’s way, to God’s Kingdom, to God’s love.

If Jesus had died and only died,
if the biblical story had ended in darkness on Golgotha amid the jeering crowd, the heart-broken disciples and women,
the anguished groaning of the victims,
then the story would be simply one more episode in human history
of goodness rejected and righteousness crucified,
of a visionary tragically cut down.

But the story did not end on Friday. After an interlude of numbness during which the disciples cowered in fear and the faithful women awaited opportunity to do their final loving service, God, the Source and Grace of Life, raised Jesus the crucified to life. To the resounding human “No” God gave an even more resounding “Yes,” and the destiny of the world was changed from darkness to light, from death to life.

Paul put it this way as he reflected on the life, death and resurrection of Jesus in light of the whole biblical story:

It was through one man that sin entered the world, and through sin death, and this death pervaded the whole human race... But God’s act of grace is out of all proportion to Adam’s wrongdoing. For if the wrongdoing of that one man brought death upon so many, its effect is vastly exceeded by the grace of God and the gift that came to so many by the grace of the one man, Jesus Christ (Romans 5:12-15)

Or, to bring it to the proclamation of the event we celebrate today, the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, we hear the words of St. Paul in our text taken from the Epistle, reading,

... Christ was raised to life – the first fruits of the harvest of the dead. For since it was a man who brought death into the world, a man also brought resurrection of the dead. As in Adam all men die, so in Christ we will be brought to life.

Then follows Paul’s vision of what is presently occurring, Jesus, the risen, reigning Lord, putting down the enemies of God’s Kingdom. Finally Paul affirms this triumphant faith:

God will be everything to everyone.

Paul’s discussion of the resurrection of Jesus in I Corinthians 15 is long and involved and I will not attempt to give a detailed analysis of it, but rather simply concentrate on this one brief paragraph. The 20th verse is the clear, unequivocal statement.

But, in fact, Christ has been raised from the dead.

This is the central affirmation of Christian faith. This is what makes Christian faith gospel – good news. That God raised Jesus from the dead is the ground of our hope. It is the ground of our hope for the redemption of the world – for a new world, a new day free of all that saddens us, hinders us, defeats us. In a word,

the resurrection of Jesus gives us hope in our hopelessness.

Let me run the scenario past you one more time. Established political power and institutional religions combined to crucify Jesus who lived out in concrete human existence the love of God. And, as we have seen from week to week throughout the season of Lent, what happened in Jerusalem on Good Friday has happened over and over again in human history and it is happening still today.

What will be Lithuania's fate?

We entered this season with Allan Boesak in this pulpit in the euphoria of breakthroughs in South Africa. Will our hopes be realized? Will our prayers be answered for justice and peace in that land?

Will Iraq threaten the Middle East with a new wave of terror with germ warfare?

As I raise this question, and they could be multiplied, is it not obvious that as much as we pray for peace and justice and work for the humanization of this world, our hope must be grounded in something or Someone beyond the roller coaster of history, beyond the fickleness of popular movements, beyond the self-serving egotism of world leaders? Must we not trust something more substantial than the present popularity of a world leader, the cleverness of human planning, the good will and faith of nations to treaties, world organizations such as the United Nations? Is it not obvious that any arrangement that rests alone on human capacity or human decency is no solid ground for human hope?

If you have followed me through the Lenten Season, you might conclude that I am a pessimist; that I do not belong to the positive thinkers' club. And you would be right. I have done my best honestly to mirror the human situation, the real historical condition and I can only conclude that the human situation in and of itself is hopeless.

But, I am not without hope. I am rather filled with hope. But only because my hope is in God. And my hope is in God because God raised Jesus from the dead.

When we said our final "No" to God Who visited us in Jesus, we undercut any possibility of hope in any purely human project. And precisely at the point of our final "No", God uttered a resounding and irreversible "Yes".

God's "Yes" conquered our "No" because God raised to life the one our "No" had crucified. And just as God conquered death in giving Jesus life from the dead, so God's "Yes" proves stronger than our "No."

As in Adam all die, so in Christ shall all be made alive.

What of our world, then? What can we expect as the drama of history goes on its perilous way? We cannot set any dates. We cannot predict the immediate outcome of the tensions in South Africa, the Middle East, Latin America. We cannot foresee the consequences of the democratization of Eastern Europe or the apparent unraveling of the Soviet Union. We pray for wellbeing. We know that, as quickly as barriers fall and walls are torn down, new crises could develop. But we also know that outside Jerusalem when Church and State – representative of the whole world – crucified Jesus, God raised him up as a sign that God will not give up on this world. With the writer of Revelation, therefore, we look for and pray for and hope for the day when

*The Kingdom of this world will become the Kingdom of our God and of His Christ and the angelic hosts sing in chorus,
"Hallelujah! The Lord God omnipotent reigns!"*

We live that vision - in hope.

But, as we gather to celebrate the resurrection of Jesus, it is not only the broad world scene, not only the matters of cosmic dimension that press upon us, important as those are. As we gather, we are a people who all have a story that is being written.

For some of us it is the pain of one we love that we carry in our hearts. A daughter calls, crying convulsively because her heart has been broken, her love betrayed and a parent's heart is crushed wishing somehow that he could take that pain from her and make it all right. In the abyss of hurt and brokenness, when there are no words to assuage the pain, wherein does one find hope to go on?

The nation was inspired by the courage and grace of Ryan White who this week died of the AIDS virus contracted through a blood transfusion. In his dying, the nation was galvanized in grief. And what do we say? Was that life worth the living? Certainly. Was that life fruitful in its impact? Surely, more so in his brief life than most of us who will live to an old age. But, is that all? Is Ryan dead and any remainder of his life will be through the remembrance of those on whose lives he had an impact? Is that all there is?

The question is much more poignant for some of you, for since Easter last you have stood by the casket of one dearly loved and sorely missed. Is there now only the memory and the void? Is dead simply dead?

Some of us have received a serious medical diagnosis since last we gathered in Easter joy. All of us carry within our bodies cells potentially lethal, but for some of us at this time they are latent; for some, they are ravaging. What does one say when one's mortality is not simply part of the general universal reality of all humankind, but when one is faced with one's own personal, lonely encounter with death? Life is a precious gift and fiercely clung to. Is there some way to relax one's grip or, better, to grasp with hope something made of surer stuff?

Each of us is writing her own storyline and few there be that escape the interweaving of that tragic thread which is so ubiquitous in the human tapestry, so dominant in the plot of our personal stories.

Wherein then lies the ground of hope? How can one escape cynicism, despair, futility? How does one cope when faced with betrayal, brokenness, loss and the last *enemy*, death itself?

For Christian faith, that ground of hope is in the God Who raised Jesus from the dead. For Christian faith, the ground of hope is the God Who, in the text from St. Paul,

will be everything to everyone,

because that God refuses to give up on this world; that God will never give up on you. That God's "Yes" was spoken on Easter morning in response to the final human "No" spoken on Good Friday.

Who is this God?

This is the God Who loved the world so much that He gave His only son – not to condemn the world, but that the world might be saved through him. This is the God Who is love and Who disclosed the radical nature of that love in sending Jesus who lived out that love so that in his life one sees into the very heart of God, the God Who was in Christ reconciling the world to himself, going to the limit in that while we were yet enemies, Jesus died for the ungodly, thus disclosing the radical, unconquerable love of God.

God is love and God is writing a story, too; it is a love story, a story of an amazing love that simply will not be turned away, a love that will never let up, a love that will never let you go. Whoever you are, wherever you are coming from –

returned on Easter from a long dropout,
cynical in general, but find the music and flowers inviting,
despairing, almost going under,
hoping against hope,
seeking, longing to believe –

God loves you and God would write you into the script of the love story He is writing. God offers you life, having promised through Jesus Christ forgiveness, peace, joy and the assurance that you will be kept by God's power now and forever.

God has spoken a "Yes" that conquers our "No."

I invite you to say "Yes" to the God Who has said "Yes" to you through Jesus Christ our Lord.