

“Steadfast Love”
 Psalm 36:5-10
 Sunday, January 20, 2019
 Rev. David Hutchinson

If love were a person - - what do you think that person would look like?

I’m NOT asking you to picture - - someone who you love.

Instead I’m asking about - - love itself.

Love - - personified.

In the case of BOTH the ancient poet Chaucer - - AND the 19th century painter Burne-Jones - - love - - is a GUIDE. / And so - - to follow them - - if love were a person - - guiding you - - what would YOUR GUIDE - - look like?

The painting which is on the front of your bulletin - - and up here on the screen - - is how Burne-Jones pictured love. / This painting is called, “Love and the Pilgrim”.

The painting depicts two people:

In this case - - the pilgrim - - is the one emerging from the thorns.

Maybe us - - pilgrims?

And the other person - - is love - - guiding the way.

The IDEA of Love - - personified as a guide - - for a Pilgrim on a quest - - came to the painter - - Burne-Jones - - from the poet Chaucer - - and his book “The Romance of the Rose”.

Chaucer’s description goes like this:

“And there upon his head was set

Of roses red a chapelet

But nightingales - - a full great route

Had flown over his head about”

If you look at the painting you can see the birds flying over Love's head.

The nightingales fly just above a crown that looks like it might be made of roses.

Or if you are imaginative - - a crown of thorns?

Well - - that's probably getting ahead of myself.

I'll get to Jesus later.

Let's just stick with the painting for a minute.

A "chapelet" is a word that means a string - - and can refer to a string of rosary beads.

So this depiction of love - - is devotional.

The stooped pilgrim - - is torn by thorns - - and still partly tangled in them.

Love has stretched out an arm to help guide the way.

Notice that love has stepped forward with ONE FOOT - - on solid rock.

This painting took 20 years to complete. / It was twenty years from the time the painting was started - - until Burne-Jones finished it. / It was a labor of love.

When it was finally exhibited in the Tate Gallery these lines accompanied it:

"Love that is first and last of all things made

The light that morning has - - man's life for shade"

The reference to light and shade make me think of the struggle to find hope.

Hope amid the challenges and despair of life.

But it is the idea of this love as "first and last of all things made" that interests me most.

One commentator says that the theme of the painting is "clearly NOT religious". / I think that's because it depicts love more broadly than divine love - - or it lacks clear Biblical references. / The commentator says the depiction of love as a winged angel is clearly a recollection of religious imagery - - but the theme is not religious - - the theme is love.

Love is broader than - - “religious” - - for this commentator.

I wonder about that.

Isn't the heart of our religion - - love?

And what does love - - have to do with faith?

Evangeline C. Booth and her husband William - - started the Salvation Army in the 1860s
- - and Evangeline preached a sermon called “God is Love”.

She says this:

“God IS love.

These three words - - are the Alpha and Omega of the Bible”

Remember the words Burne-Jones used to describe his painting:

“Love that is the first and last of all things made”

God is love - - the Alpha and Omega of the Bible...

She goes on:

“Every judgment that has thundered across its pages...

Every promise that has rainbowed the storms...

Every solace

Every warning

Every efficacy

Every refuge - - - HAS BEEN - - by virtue of this indestructible truth of the ages:

God is love.”

With her words as a witness - - I would say - - a painting about love clearly IS religious.

It might even be called - - the definition of religious.

In her sermon she goes on to dig deeper into what we MEAN - - when we say, “love”.

Some of us think we understand that word “Love”. / And perhaps we do when it is related to the human heart. / For sweep of influence - - for magnitude of power - - it rivals every other sentiment known in the human family. / It is the daybreak of every earthly night.

It is the star in every human sky.

What is money, or beauty, or fame - - when compared to love?”

There is the love of children for parents. / That is a wonderful love.

A mother’s love is a wonderful thing.

A father’s love - - there is nothing more beautiful.

Yet - - human love in comparison to God’s love - - is as a candle to the sun.”

So - - I thought about her words - - and my question about religion.

Maybe - - not ALL love - - is religious?

But some - - truly is.

What does love look like - - when it is a real expression of faith?

I wondered about this.

And came across the words of a book we are going to spend time with at the Monday night study group starting in February and March. / The book is called “Love Does” and it is by Bob Goff.

In the introduction, his friend Donald Miller writes this about Bob:

“Where you and I may WANT love - - and FEEL love - - and SAY love - - Bob reminds us that love DOES THINGS. / It writes a letter - - and gets on a plane - - it orders pizza - - and jumps in a lake - - it hugs - - and prays - - and cries - - and sings.”

“Much of what we’ve come to know and believe about love - - doesn’t ring true - - once you know this man whose love - - DOES”.

So if this book is right about love - - it does - - it is a verb - - then...

What does God's love - - - do?

And is it different from all the things that are described about human love?

Does God's love - - hug?

Does God's love - - cry - - or sing - - or jump in a lake?

Maybe - - somehow - - in Jesus - - it does.

But to really answer the question - - I return to Evangeline Booth.

In her sermon "God is Love" she describes it this way:

"It is a love that COMES DOWN"

Coming down - - to talk to fisherman and wait on a table.

Coming down.

How deep is your sorrow?

How deep is your sin?

God's love - - is a love that COMES DOWN.

That's what God's love - - - DOES.

As I thought about that - - I remembered something that happened to me years ago in Nicaragua. / I was visiting there as part of a "Witness for Peace" delegation. / We were people of faith who - - believed that putting your faith into action was important. / And one way to show people living in a war zone - - what faithful love looked like was by going there.

We went there to study the church there - - to pray - - to hear their struggles.

We wanted to stand with them.

We wanted to say that not every American believed in the war that was hurting them.

We hoped to embody our love and our faith - - by showing up.

What happened, however - - was kind of the opposite:

Much MORE than ME putting my love into action - - they did.

When I arrived I was shocked at first by the poverty.

I had never been in a country that poor before.

My host family lived in a small two room house with a dirt floor.

My companion and I were welcomed in and they showed us how to make tortillas over the open fire in the kitchen - - which was one of the two rooms.

We showered in the back yard in a small enclosure with no roof.

When the time came for sleeping - - this family of five offered the two of us their ONE bed. / It was in the other room. / They would sleep on the dirt floor in their kitchen.

How could you say “yes” - - - but - - - how could you say “no”.

It was a matter of utmost honor to them.

It was a matter of showing love and faith.

And so we slept in that bed - - as well as we could - - thinking about it all.

Another story:

When my dad and I talked about death - - we talked about birds.

When his dad - - my grandfather - - died - - - there had been something unresolved between them. / And he had prayed about it the night after grandpa’s death. / He told me about seeing a black bird the next day - - and something about it made him think of grandpa.

After my dad died - - I was missing him and one day I looked up and saw a flock of birds in that V shape they make with one leading the way. / Then I looked and there was ONE bird out of synch with the others - - flying its own way - - AWAY from the V shape and the other birds.

That's DAD! - - I thought

He was always - - independent and stubborn - - doing things his own way.

I tell you this story because I was reflecting on it as I prepared for today.

I do not think that the incident with the bird is necessarily a sign or proof of something.

I do certainly NOT believe the incident with the bird PROVES that DAD loved ME.

I know he loved me - - for other reasons.

What is PROOF - - anyway?

But - - the more I thought about it - - I realized I DO think it DOES prove something.

It doesn't prove dad loved me - - but it does prove that I loved dad.

Now go back to the words of Evangeline Booth one more time:

Human love - - in comparison to God's love - - is a CANDLE to the SUN.

And God IS love.

That is the Alpha and the Omega of our faith.

That love is personified in Jesus.

That love is our guide.

So - - how is that love - - guiding you?