

## Human or Divine Love?

Romans 12:09f

Sermon Transcript by Rev. Ernest O'Neill

Last week we talked about that tragedy in the Potomac River and about the man who was a typical example of genuine love--the man who was one of the survivors in the Air Florida crash who, when the life saving ring was thrown to him passed it on to four other people, and they were saved and he was drowned. [Air Florida Flight 90 crashed into Potomac on January 13, 1982 - Arland D. Williams Jr. is the man mentioned above] Even President Reagan made the same connection as we did--the classic statement of genuine love that Jesus gave us--"Greater love hath no man than this that a man lay down his life for his friends."

I would ask you this morning: What do you think of that event and of what that man did? Inside in your heart, what do you think? I think some of us would say, "It was an expression of great bravery and presence of mind and unselfishness. That is all there is to it. All one can do is sit back and thank God that such men are still alive." I think many of us feel, "I sure wish that if I were in that situation that I would do that. Maybe I would have done it hoping that they would come back and pick me up after they took the other four. I don't know." I think some of us would say, "I wonder if I would have done it. Maybe human beings make great sacrifices like that at times of classic moments of catastrophe and rescue. Maybe I would have somehow risen to that dignity, but I don't know."

I think some of us would wonder, "Did that man live that way every day? It was great what he did, but I wonder did he live like that hour by hour and day by day?" Whether he did or not, I know that is the problem in my own life. I might somehow rise to that at a great moment of catastrophe when there is an opportunity to express unselfishness, but my problem is hourly and daily putting other people's welfare and interests before my own. It is just not a natural thing to do." I think many of us feel like that. We admire Moses when he said, "Forgive your people, Lord, or if you don't, blot me out of your book." We admire Paul when he said, "I would rather that I were accursed than that my fellow Jews would be lost." We are awestruck when we see Jesus going to hell in our place. But isn't it true that there is a tendency in us little human beings to think, "That is the height of love. There is no love greater than that. There is no love greater than putting your own life at the point of sacrifice so that other people will live. Greater love no man can have than this, and I'm afraid that my love will probably not reach those heights."

Loved ones, that is where we get into trouble. When we start thinking that what we are talking about is just a matter of degrees of love and we don't quite show that degree of love. That is what gets us into the miserable practice of regarding love as a thing that we aim at, an ideal that we try to achieve. That is what gets us into this self-righteousness business and this works salvation business. "It is just a matter of degree of love. The man in the Potomac River, his love was greater than the love I often show myself. Moses and Jesus and Paul, their love was greater than the love that I normally show." So by that kind of misconception we get ourselves into a never-ending task of thinking that love is something that we have to work at; love is something we are to aim at and try to hit. Maybe at the end of our lives we will hit it.

Loved ones, the fact is we would be far safer to hold to the idea that we first had--that it just doesn't seem natural to love like that. We would be nearer the mark if we would hold onto that. Instead we have a tendency to think, "The love that we have is just different in degree from the

love that they show." Yet the truth is that most of us find that we have trouble even with the lesser degrees of love. Forget the life and death stuff. Forget the life ring being thrown to you in the Potomac and four other people wanting it too. We have difficulty with the lesser ways in which we have to put other people first.

Matthew 7:12 is one expression of genuine love that says the same to you as it says to me about our lives. "So whatever you wish that men would do to you, do so to them." It seems like a step down. It is not "Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life." There is no laying down your life here. It is just "So whatever you wish that men would do to you, do so to them." But isn't it true, we have trouble even with that one? First of all there is a great pull inside us to think, "If I want them to do it to me, I'll do it to them," and the old selfish motive works. If we do get over that selfish motive, isn't it true that we have trouble doing it? What do you feel like when you hear that some group of people have been talking about you behind your back? You know you feel insecure and on your own, so left out of it all.

Yet, how often we talk about somebody else behind their back and we don't want them to do it to us. We would think they are being dishonest and hypocritical if they would do it to us, but don't we do it to them? How often we discourage each other with criticism that we don't intend to be helpful criticism. It is discouraging criticism. Yet we would hate them to do it to us. We would think they are unfair and very harsh if they discouraged us by their criticism. How often we take advantage of certain opportunities that come to us instead of offering them to somebody else. Yet we would think other people should be fair and generous to us. So isn't it true that even in this lesser degree of love, many of us have real trouble putting the other person before ourselves? This vicarious idea of putting their interests before your interests, of guarding them instead of guarding yourself, of loving them as if they were yourself--that whole experience is something that causes us difficulty.

We find the opposite true. It is more natural to do to other people what you don't want them to do to you than to do to them what you want them to do. It is more natural to do the very things to them that you criticize them for doing to you. We find it is easier to reinterpret this command "Love your neighbor as yourself" to mean "Love yourself first and then love your neighbor along with yourself." Because we feel we should look out for ourselves. So most of us who call ourselves children of God end up sinking to the same level as those who don't believe Jesus is Savior, that is, we sink into the level of the Golden Rule: "Take care of yourself and do what you can for other people as long as it isn't too inconvenient." But that is far from the kind of positive, self-sacrificing love that Jesus talked about as genuine love.

Isn't it true that we have equal difficulty with some of the more elementary elements of genuine love? You know that one that is brought up in John 3:16: "God so loved the world that he gave..." I think we all agree, "Love is giving. That is a noble concept." We all say to ourselves, "That is what I want to aim at. I want to aim at loving my wife, loving my roommate, loving my friends, loving my colleagues at work so that I give to them." But we find that it is more natural to take than to give. We believe that we should lay our talents, our abilities, our aptitudes and the warmth of our emotions at the disposal of our friends and loved ones for them to use for their own benefit. But it is hard to do it, isn't it?

In fact, there is something inside us that says, "That doesn't sound right. Didn't I get them for myself? Am not I supposed to use them to forward my own prosperity and future?" We believe that giving should be being transparent, don't we? We all talk about being transparent. We all like it when somebody else seems to be obviously open with us. It gives us confidence, doesn't it? You don't

feel they are hiding behind something ready to whack you. You feel they are open, up front. We like up front people. We think that that is a good thing to be, and we believe love is really giving yourself, not keeping part of yourself away, being transparent and open and sharing all that you are with the other person and holding nothing back. We believe that, and yet our own attitude is more like a boxer with his guard up more often than it is down, just in case somebody comes and whips us. Or we find we are more like a little animal that is always wary, looking after itself to see if anybody is coming from behind a tree. So we fall into this tragic situation where we all agree that genuine love is all that we have said. It is all that the guy in the Potomac did and we are aiming at it, but we can't quite get it.

Loved ones, the truth is that our frustration and our failure to love is because we keep thinking we are loving with genuine love and we are just not loving enough, and we will love enough if we keep trying. In other words, we think the problem is degrees of love. That is not the problem. When you and I keep our guard up, when you and I are on the lookout for ourselves first and do a little for the other if we can, we are not involved in divine love at all. The word in Romans 12:9, where God says, "Let love be genuine" is not the Greek word "eros."

Eros is the title of the god statue that is in Piccadilly Circus in London. Eros in Greek (it gives us the English word "erotic") is sexual love or the love that wants physical and emotional satisfaction from other people, the love that wants its needs fulfilled. That isn't the word that is used here. So when we dear husbands are after our own satisfaction, or dear girlfriends and boyfriends are after our own satisfaction in a car or out together or in the apartment at night, we are not dealing with love at all. We are dealing with eros. We are dealing with that desire for sexual satisfaction and fulfillment of our needs. So are the rest of us who do it a little more nicely. We are annoyed that people aren't attending to us or interested in us or noticing us. It is the same thing. It may not be sexy, but is the same need for fulfillment of our needs. That is eros love.

The Greek word is not even "philia." Philia is the word that is found in Philadelphia--philia delphus--loving the brethren. Philia is the kind of love that people feel for one another when they bowl together or have an interest in motorcycles or have some things in common. It is still a kind of selfish thing because you are getting something from the other person; they are reinforcing you in your own interests. The word in Romans 12:9 is "agape." That's the love. It isn't a different degree of love; it is different kind of love. It is the love that Jesus has for a leper. The leper couldn't do him any good, couldn't give him any physical or emotional satisfaction, wasn't any use to him. The leper wasn't even lovable. He had withered flesh, he was unpleasant looking, and he was filled with disease. The leper wasn't lovable and he wasn't any use to Jesus, but Jesus loved him because his heart was filled with love. That is agape love. You pour it out because it is there. Your heart is full of it because Jesus' heart was full of the heart and attitude of his Father who made the world. It is a different kind of love; it is not a different degree of love.

It is a divine love, not a human love. You and I live like little orphans. Our basic attitude is--"I'd better look after myself. If I don't, who will? I had better love myself first and then and only then can I risk loving other people. If I don't love myself, who is going to love me?" So we are like little orphans. We are kind of scared, we feel we are on our own and so our hearts are filled with that kind of defensiveness. Jesus is absolutely certain that his Father is looking down on him, watching every moment of his life; has him in his hands and won't drop him for a second. He can trust his Father for all his own security, for all the purpose of his life, for all his welfare. So, he is free to give his life to the rest of us. He doesn't need to look out for himself at all.

Now that is what happens to you and me if we take the same attitude as Jesus. If you will take the same attitude as he does, that he and his Father love you and know you well. If your attitude is that the two of them that put you here to do something that only you can do are going to look after your welfare and your interests, they are going to take care of you. They are going to watch over you when you can't watch over yourself, they are going to watch over your reputation, they are going to watch out for the way people treat you and they are going to take care of you. If you will take that attitude and have that kind of faith in your Father's love for you, suddenly, loved ones, he will begin to pour into your heart this magnificently free love for the rest of us.

In fact, you will be free to love the rest of us. You won't have to look out for yourself. The Bible says God's love is shed abroad in our hearts by the Holy Spirit. [Romans 5:5] Agape love is not the love that you can work up. You can't pump up human love into agape love. Agape love is a gift from God. It is the fruit of his Spirit and he pours his Spirit into you when you at last say, "Lord, I believe it. You put all the trees and oceans here. You keep the Atlantic from overflowing its banks, you look after everything. I believe you have put me here and I believe you haven't put me here to struggle along myself. I believe you are going to take care of me as you said that you will supply every need of mine. Lord, I'm going to believe that. Dear Father, thank you for being my father. I'm going to put my life in your hands and forget myself from this moment on. I'm going to spend my life doing what you have done for me. I'm going to spend my life living it for other people, and putting them in place of myself, because I have now got myself off my hands and into your hands." That's it, loved ones.

It is impossible without faith, because love is shed abroad in our hearts through the Holy Spirit. You should look at the verse so you can take it away with you. Romans 5:5: "And hope does not disappoint us, because God's love" [God's agape] "has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit which has been given to us." It is a miracle. It is what God gives to those of us who at last accept reality.

And reality is that he is our Father. He is your father. I don't care if you have never believed in Jesus or anything before. You can't get around the fact that this dear God that made you is your father. He thinks of you as his child. If you look at your life, have you guaranteed a thing? Have you? Think of the many things that have happened to you that could have destroyed you in a moment, but something prevented them. Think of the good things that have happened to you. Have you brought them about? Most of them, we haven't. We say, "It is by providence" or "It is luck." It is not! It is a dear, loving Father who broods over you every day. When you are asleep, you think he is downstairs in the living room watching TV, or away looking after President Reagan or the Polish people. He is outside your bedroom door, listening to see how you are breathing. That is how little you need to worry about yourself. That is why, the moment you believe, that moment your heart is filled with the Spirit and his love is shed abroad in your heart. I do pray that you will stop being a little orphan and begin living that way. Let us pray.

Dear God, we do see the sense of it and it comes home to us in our hearts as truth. We see what we need to do this morning, Lord, is take a new attitude in our lives. We need to stop thinking about ourselves as on our own sent here to hack out some kind of life as best we can while you all the time have been watching over us, waiting for us someday, a day like today, to look up and say, "Father, I am sorry for being such a child and for ignoring you for so long. I can see in your actions in my life your love. I can see your hand in so many things that have happened to me. Father, forgive me for ignoring you and continuing to take such an interest in myself and so little

interest in my friends. Father, I accept that you are looking after me and that I don't need to watch out for myself that I can spend my life watching out for others. So Father, I would step into this life today. Oh, Lord, we would. We would step out into faith and accept what has been the case all along -- you are our Father -- you will never leave us or forsake us. You will supply every need of ours from your riches in glory in Christ Jesus. Father, we thank you that your heart has become ours and your Spirit has become ours. We thank you that your love is being shed in our hearts this very moment. We would begin to show that agape love to our wives, children, roommates and colleagues from this day forward.

Now the grace of our Lord Jesus, the love of God the Father and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with us today and throughout this week. Amen.