

"How Do I Know Jesus Loves Me?"

(A Sermon for the Second Sunday after Pentecost)

Text: Romans 5:6-8, John 15:13, 1 John 4:10, Eph. 5:2

Lectionary Texts: Genesis 18:1-15; Psalm 100; Matthew 9:35-10:8; Romans 5:1-8

Subject: Substitution.

Desired Response: Allow the impact of what He has done to assure you of His love.

How To: Feel how much He loves you.

How Long: As you sense God's love, respond in kind.

Sermon in a Sentence: "Perceptive people allow the impact of Christ's substitutionary death to assure them of His great love!"

Worship Theme: "God continually reminds His children of how very much He loves them."

"Do you love me? I mean, do you really love me?"

Have you ever heard those words said to you. Or, even a more profound question, have you ever said those words to someone?

On the one hand, those words offer a uniquely revealing gambit to the conversation that might follow. They could come as a bit of a coy opener. Or, more probably, they could come from a momentary sense of insecurity.

I'm no stranger to insecurity when it comes to interpersonal relationships. So, I can identify with the plaintive, almost whiny, voice that asks, "Do you love me?"

In years past, I remember knowing in my head that the Lord loved me. Factually, I didn't question that at all, but on an emotional level, I didn't feel His love. But, that wasn't too surprising because I almost never "felt" the love of anyone.

Oh, I knew that my mom and dad loved me. After all, as they told me over and over again during my early childhood years, they had "chosen me." You see, I was adopted. My parents had been married for 16 years when they finally located a child to adopt: me. So, I truly did know that my parents loved me. But, I didn't "feel" loved.

I chose to study Psychology in college specifically because I knew I did not feel the same about many things that other people did. And, I found some answers through the counseling in which psych students were required to engage.

At the time I was adopted, the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania enforced a required waiting period of six weeks for babies being put up for adoption to stay in the care of a licensed caregiver, usually a registered nurse, before the baby was surrendered to the adoptive parents. At the time I was born, the nurse caring for me was also looking after ten other babies. As a result, I spent the first six weeks of my life with very little cuddling compared to a normal child. Now you may think that wouldn't, or perhaps, shouldn't make any difference. But, it turns out that lack of loving physical contact makes a great deal of difference in the way a child develops the ability to "feel" love.

Perhaps that helps explain why, in years past, I remember knowing in my head that the Lord loved me. Factually, I didn't question that at all, but on an emotional level, I didn't feel His love. Looking back from my current vantage point, this seems strange to me. But, it was a real part of where I was back then. I thank God for the change, but I'm also sensing that some of you may still be at the place where I once was. And, I view my task today as opening up those feelings of being loved by God for you.

Fortunately, the most important love relationship is the one we have with God. His love is from everlasting to everlasting. It never fails. It always flows from Him to us in an amazingly supportive way.

The Apostle John seemed to anticipate the fact that some of the early Christians might, from time to time, begin to doubt the reality of God's love for them. In response, he penned these words found in 1 John 4:9:

This is how God showed his love among us: He sent his one and only Son into the world that we might live through him.

Can there ever be a more positive and affirming way of showing His love than for God to have sacrificed His one and only Son in our place? I think not. And, it's is something we should remember.

God's love is so great for us, that He sent His Son to die on our behalf. No wonder we sing songs of praise about His enormous love for us. No wonder we can always safely rest in shelter of His loving arms.

We never need to ask God, "Do you love me?" He has already answered with a resounding, "Yes!"

You aren't perchance feeling unloved of late are you? Do you have a "Nobody cares for me!" attitude? Do you wonder why you observe others who seem to get along well with many people, while you stand in the corner all alone?

A pastor friend of mine, counseling someone who came to the front of the sanctuary for help after a church service, recounted this story.

As my pastor friend approached the individual, he asked, "Friend, what is your problem?"

The one who came forward responded, "I only have one friend in all the world, and I can't stand him!"

Well, you may not feel quite that isolated, at least I hope you don't. But, it's possible that right now in your life you sense neither man's love nor God's.

A key word in understanding the depth of God's love for us is the word "SUBSTITUTION." Now, this word isn't actually found in the Bible. However, the concept is certainly there.

A "substitute" is one who takes the place of another. That's easy enough. We're all familiar with substitute teachers. And, in the realm of sports we know of the various times when one player substitutes for another. In

fact, I always smile when the buzzer sounds during a game and a particular University of Connecticut Women's Basketball player enters the court to the applause of the crowd. Coach Geno Auriemma has made a substitution. Now things will really begin to happen.

In the world of Evangelical Christian Theology, we usually couple this word "substitute" with another powerful word, the word "atonement." "Substitutionary atonement"—I'm quite certain you've heard that phrase, haven't you?

"Atonement" refers to satisfaction given for a wrong done, to atone for. Scripturally, man's wrongdoing is sin, and without the shedding of blood there can be no remission of it. So, back in the Old Testament, God instituted the system of blood sacrifice. In that connection, probably terms like the yearly "Day of Atonement" come to your mind.

In the New Testament Book of Hebrews, Chapter 10:1-4, we're told:

¹ The law is only a shadow of the good things that are coming—not the realities themselves. For this reason it can never, by the same sacrifices repeated endlessly year after year, make perfect those who draw near to worship. ² Otherwise, would they not have stopped being offered? For the worshipers would have been cleansed once for all, and would no longer have felt guilty for their sins. ³ But those sacrifices are an annual reminder of sins. ⁴ It is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins.

Consequently, Christ came into the world and offered His body once and for all on our behalf. He takes the place of, or substitutes for, humans in this matter of atonement.

A synonymous term would be "vicarious atonement." A dad who never had a chance to go to college and be a star football player now experiences that thrill vicariously through his son's accomplishments. Restated, through another, the experience is still his. It's very close to the substitute idea.

So, speaking of the Lord Jesus Christ, the terms "the vicarious atonement," or "the substitutionary atonement" both provide a transactional atonement in which we truly participate, only we do so through another—the sinless and perfect Son of God.

Here's Romans 5:1-8:

¹ Therefore, since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, ² through whom we have gained access by faith into this grace in which we now stand. And we boast in the hope of the glory of God. ³ Not only so, but we also glory in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; ⁴ perseverance, character; and character, hope. ⁵ And hope does not put us to shame, because God's love has been poured out into our hearts through the Holy Spirit, who has been given to us.

⁶ You see, at just the right time, when we were still powerless, Christ died for the ungodly. ⁷ Very rarely will anyone die for a righteous person, though for a good person someone might possibly dare to die. ⁸ But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.

The sterilization of today's modern world unfortunately masks the horror of crucifixion. The cross has lost its ability to jar people. I believe to actually witness such an event would probably put most of us in shock.

Roman floggings were bad enough. How do you control emotions that almost produce convulsions while watching a man's body being ripped and gutted with stroke after merciless stroke of the lash?

Screams of terror, spikes and ropes, nakedness in the hot sun, blood, groans, torture—hours of it: that was the evil genius of the public cross. "Thank God it's someone else"—that's what the Romans wanted onlookers to say. It made prospective lawbreakers think twice before doing anything.

Have you ever imagined yourself the victim in such a horrible situation? When I was a boy I used to think, What if I was part of a mutiny at sea and we got caught? Or, while fighting in the army, what if I got captured and the enemy wanted secret information from me? Fear of punishment is a powerful motivator—at least it is for most mentally sane people.

Well, I've gotten older now and it's not just preacher-talk. The truth is—wait; God's truth states—that all of us, because of sin, stand condemned and must pay with our blood for our opposition, our mutiny, our rebellion against God. The sentence, not just physical death, but eternal damnation, never ending ... all hope gone ... frightening ... not a friend in the world.

But, of a sudden, another volunteers to take my place ... and yours. A kind and gracious and brave man befriends us. "Listen," He whispers, "Greater love—did you hear me?—Greater love has no man that this, that a man lay down his life for his friends."

1 John 4:9-10:

"In this the love of God was manifest among us, that God sent His only Son into the world, so that we might live through Him. In this is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us, and sent His Son to be the expiation [the atoning sacrifice] for our sins."

Henry A. Ironside, for so many years the pastor at Moody Memorial Church in downtown Chicago, told this story. I quote his words:

One of the great generals of Cyrus the Great came home from a campaign, and was shocked to find that in his absence his own wife had been arrested and was languishing in prison. She was charged with treachery against her country, and the trial was to be held that very day. The general hastened to the court of Cyrus, and the guards brought in his own beloved wife. She, poor with wonder, pale and anxious, tried to answer the charges brought against her, but all to no avail.

Her husband, standing near, heard the stern voice of the Persian ruler pronounce the death sentence. In a moment, as they were about to drag her away to behead her, he ran forward and threw himself down at the feet of the Emperor.

"Oh sire," he cried, "not she, but me. Let me give my life for hers. Put me to death, but spare my wife." And, as Cyrus looked down upon him, he was so touched by his deep devotion and his love for his wife that his heart was softened. He remembered, too, how faithful this servant had been, and he gave command that the wife should go free. She was fully pardoned.

As her husband led her out of the room, he said to her, "Did you notice the kind look in the eyes of the Emperor as he pronounced the word of pardon?"

She said, "I did not see the face of the Emperor. The only face that I could see was that of the man who was willing to die for me."

That's the response I want from me and from you ... to see Christ make that same move on our behalf and again know beyond a shadow of a doubt that we are indeed loved—loved even beyond our most vivid imagination.

No friend in the world? Not so! The songwriter, James G. Small, states it well:

We've found a friend, o such a friend!
He loved us ere we knew him.
He drew us with the cords of love
and thus he bound us to him.
And 'round our hearts still closely twine
those ties which can't be severed.
For we are his and he is ours
forever and forever.

"Perceptive people allow the impact of Christ's substitutionary death to assure them of His great love." Again: "Perceptive people allow the impact of Christ's substitutionary death to assure them of His great love."

Have you ever gone out of your way to do something special for somebody with no motive whatsoever other than the desire to say, "You mean a great deal to me. I love you very much!"? But, regardless of your efforts, the person didn't seem to read as much into what you were attempting to say as you felt he or she should?

You can identify a little, then, with what I want to do next. This morning, it's my desire, in fact it's my fondest hope, to multiply those keen feelings of frustration you felt by infinity, and you'll be at the place where God is so many times!

Now, if I could somehow just get the two of you together! ... Your need to feel loved, and God's desire is to lavish love upon you.

Say—I think God's willing to get together—what about you?

Great. Listen to Him share some of His feelings with you. The Apostle Paul speaks His words to you on God's behalf in Romans 8:32:

He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all—how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things?

And, from Romans 8:35-39:

³⁵ *Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword?*

³⁶ *As it is written: "For your sake we face death all day long; we are considered as sheep to be slaughtered."*

³⁷ *No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us.* ³⁸ *For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers,* ³⁹ *neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.*

In pursuing someone that we may love, we all learn the lesson early that it's simply not enough to merely say we love that person. We have to make a genuine effort to show our love—to demonstrate it—in as tangible a way as possible.

Once we recognize that God loves us, we who follow in the footsteps of Jesus must also recognize that, as His ambassadors, we must demonstrate His love, we must face the question: “How can we best show God's love to others?”

The Apostle John offers some words of advice in 1 John 3:18:

Dear children, let us not love with words or speech but with actions and in truth.

We show God's love by how we act toward others—not in a false way, but in the most truthful way possible. This has become increasingly difficult in a society where we observe behaviors that we may not agree with because we believe such behavior is sinful. Yet, Jesus treated sinners with love and compassion in the hope that He might draw them irresistibly into His mercy, grace, and love.

That's a good pattern for us, as we begin each new day. No matter what

we may think about the particular behavior of others, our charge is to demonstrate the love of God to them with compassion and also with truth.

The lead pastor of Hillsong Church in Australia, Brian Houston, was recently asked how his church would respond to people who had chosen a lifestyle that differed with his church's beliefs. He answered, “We will welcome them with love and kindness, but we will not affirm their behavior.”

That sounds like a very difficult, even challenging, way to live. But, isn't that exactly what the Apostle John suggested in the verse above?

No one said living for Jesus would be easy—just that it would be the most blessing-filled way of life.

Satisfied? Do you feel loved by God? Are you ready to show His love to others? Now, my friend, I urge you to take some time later today, get alone, and share your feelings with Him. Let Him know how you feel in response to what He has done for you through His Son, Jesus.

“Perceptive people allow the impact of Christ's substitutionary death to assure them of His great love!”

Amen.