

**“What Kind of a God...?” (1 Cor. 1:18)      Lent 3, March 15, 2009**

It had been a tough day for this hospital chaplain – one crisis after another. And what had really made the day tough was just feeling kind of useless. Like when he'd met the parents of a 4-year old who was suffering from cancer, and he'd offered to pray with them. The mother had just turned away. The father had been more vocal. “Pray? I don't think so, reverend. Frankly, I don't think God's much interested in us. How could He be? What kind of a God would let a child suffer like this? Certainly not a God of love!” The chaplain had looked at the 4-year old. Then he'd looked again at the parents. And what could he possibly say? He had just felt useless! Thankfully, his shift was soon over, so, tired and depressed, he dragged himself home. Once there, he hung up his coat, flopped down on the couch, and promptly drifted off to sleep.

Then...he had the most amazing dream! He dreamed that he was in heaven, but the scene was anything but heavenly. No, he saw a huge mob pounding angrily at pearly gates. And why? They wanted to put God on trial – for fraud! They shouted, *“God claims to be a God of love! And He just expects us to believe it! Well, talk is cheap! It's easy for Him to say He loves us when He's just sitting up here in heaven, but that's pretty hard to believe when we're struggling so much down below. So we want to put God on trial! Either let Him prove His love for us, or let Him admit that He's a fraud!”*

Then, from the other side, he heard a commanding voice respond: *“God understands your complaint and accepts your challenge. But what kind of proof do you seek? What will it take for God to prove that He is a God of love?”* The mob hadn't thought about that, so they selected five people to decide for them, five people who had suffered terribly. One was a Jew who had died at Auschwitz. One was a slave who had been lynched by the Ku Klux Klan. One had been tortured in Stalin's Gulag. One had been burned at the stake by the Inquisition. And one was a mother from Darfur who'd seen her children starve to death. These five conferred at great length, and at last they came up with a test.

They said, *“This is how God must prove that He is a God of love. He must live among us as a true human being – but not live a comfortable life! No, no! He must be born in poverty with the legitimacy of his birth in doubt, and He must grow up as part of an oppressed minority. Then as an adult, He must suffer – suffer greatly...and unjustly. Let Him be persecuted for speaking the truth. Let Him be hated for living in peace. Let Him be condemned though perfectly innocent. And then, when He's endured all that, He must suffer a horrible death. Let a trusted friend betray Him. Let His other friends forsake Him! Let Him know what it's like to feel utterly alone! And let Him be tortured. Let Him be whipped, beaten, despised, spit-upon, thoroughly humiliated. And when all that is done, let Him die the most agonizing way imaginable. This is the proof we demand! This is what God must do to convince us! Only if He passes this test will we believe He is a God of love.”*

The rest of the mob shouted approval and waited for God to answer. They thought: *Surely, God will fail the test. Surely, God will be proven a fraud.* But then the pearly gates swung open. Slowly, deliberately, a lone figure walked out to them, and they recognized Him immediately. They recognized Him from the wounds in His hands, feet, and side. They recognized Him from the scars of the whip on His back. They recognized Him from the marks where a crown of thorns had pierced His noble brow. Slowly, deliberately, this lone figure walked out to them and simply stood before them. He didn't say a word. He didn't have to. He Himself was the answer to their demands, and they knew it. The trial was over. The test had been met. God had proven His love long ago. On Calvary. On the cross of Christ.

This story has to make you think, doesn't it? Especially in times like these, when people are all too willing to pass judgment on God, all too ready to dismiss God's love. Personally, I have been in the same place as the chaplain in that story. At some time or another, I suspect we all have. We've all heard the question: *"What kind of a God could let a thing like this happen?"* And at such times, we've probably sensed that it's not really a question being asked. It's a judgment being passed: *"That this happened proves God cannot be a God of love."* And what can we say? We know that this judgment is really more emotion than theology. We know that it's mainly expressing hurt, confusion; the pain of loss. And when we hear people talk this way, we know that it really is not the best time to set them straight, much less chide them for thinking that way. The emotion is too strong. Our words will not be heard. They might even do more harm than good.

Yet by the same token, we can't just let the judgment stand. It's not true, and what's more, it's not helpful. For if there is one truth we need to be able to hold onto in this life, it's the assurance that, come what may, we have a God of love we can count on. Yes, come what may! Especially when we are hurting, and it feels so unfair! Especially when we are blind-sided and do not understand why. Especially when life deals us a bitter blow and the pain of loss runs deep. Especially then, we need to know at an even deeper level: I have a God whose love is so great that **"neither death, nor life...nor anything in all creation"** will be able to separate me from His love. I need that assurance. You need that assurance. We all do! And the truth is: we have that assurance – vividly, powerfully, indisputably proven in **"Christ crucified."** In fact, that is why we **"proclaim Christ crucified"** – **"a stumbling block"** to some perhaps, and **"foolishness"** to others, **"but to us who are called, Christ the power of God,"** Christ **"the wisdom of God,"** and most helpful of all, Christ the proof of what kind of a God we have – a God who was **"in Christ, reconciling the world to Himself;"** a God who **"purchased us with His own blood;"** a God who willingly came down from heaven, took on human flesh and blood, suffered the worst this life could dish out, and used that very pain to guarantee us forgiveness and eternal life as a gift of grace. Yes, that is why we **"proclaim Christ crucified,"** because when we look at Him we see exactly what kind of a God we have – and see that He certainly is a God of love!

In fact, the more we look at “**Christ crucified,**” the more we see the love of God. The more we probe the meaning of “**Christ crucified,**” the more we see the character of God. And I suspect that is one of the reasons we focus so much on “**Christ crucified**” during Lent. It prepares us ahead of time for those moments when our broken hearts cry out, “*What kind of a God could let a thing like this happen?*” It fortifies us ahead of time, so that we do not slip automatically into judging God. It equips us ahead of time to keep a tight grip on our assurance, “*Come what may, I do have a God of love.*” After all, Lent is a time to think more clearly about God and our relationship with Him. Lent is a time to reflect more rationally on what we can know about God and expect from Him. And dare I say it? Lent is a time to examine the assumptions we carry around inside – which may include some that are not true or helpful, especially in the tough times of life.

For let’s be brutally honest. What are some assumptions that might be hidden in the question, “*What kind of a God could let a thing like this happen?*” What are some assumptions that might make one answer, “*He’s certainly not a God of love?*” Shall we list just a few? For starters, how about the assumption that God owes us certain things – and that we have the right to judge Him “unloving” if He doesn’t come through? Or how about the assumption that life is supposed to run smoothly – and if it doesn’t, something is radically wrong? Or how about the assumption that for love to be real it needs to feel loving on my terms? Or the assumption that for God’s love to be real, I must be able to see it clearly and understand how it benefits me? Or how about the assumption that I should be able to use my free will any way I like, and others should be able to use their free will any way they like, but there should never be negative consequences – at least, none that impact my life? For of course that, too, would prove that God is not really a God of love! Yes, how about these assumptions...just for starters?

Put this way, we see these assumptions for what they are, don’t we? Utter nonsense. Utter selfishness. Only the most spoiled child or the most delusional egotist would express such assumptions *out loud!* But however exaggerated they may sound *put this way*, these assumptions are all too common – even among religious people. Take it from one who has heard all too often, “*What kind of a God...?*” For that matter, take it from one who knows too well the weakness in his own heart! And don’t we all? Don’t we all know the temptation to feel like God owes us, even though up here we know God has given us everything and owes us nothing? Don’t we also know the temptation to think life should run smoothly, that problems are abnormal, and that if we suffer, something’s gone radically wrong? Most of all, don’t we know the temptation to judge God’s love by how it feels to us, how it benefits us, and whether it delivers us from negative consequences? Surely, none of us are so saintly that we’ve never felt a twinge of disgruntlement and thought, “*What kind of a God...?*” And in our better moments, we know where this comes from – from our fallen nature; from our inner egotist that wants what it wants when it wants it. But in our tougher moments, reason gets foggy. Emotion speaks up. Judgment bubbles over. And then, it’s all too easy to forget what kind of a God we have.

That is why faith needs to prepare itself ahead of time – so that we don't forget! And that is why we especially need to focus on "**Christ crucified**" – so that when push comes to shove we will remember, "*I have a God of love I can count on!*" If we're going to forget something, let it be the assumptions of our inner egotist. They have no basis in fact. They're just the fumes of emotion. And let's remember: all we really have to go on is what God has specifically revealed.

I mean, the truth is: God is so high above us, so far beyond us, that we can't even begin to grasp what He is like in his true nature. Still less can we ever hope to figure out His character or His motives. Frankly, an amoeba would have a better chance of figuring out us than we have figuring out God! So to think we have what it takes to critique God's character or judge His motives – that's just bizarre! All we have to go on is what God has specifically revealed. And what God has specifically revealed centers on the cross, centers on "**Christ crucified.**" That's how He shows us what kind of a God we have! And He's not the kind of God who stays sublimely above it all, but One who's gotten down into the muck and mire of human existence. He's not the kind of God who says, "*You made your bed, now sleep in it,*" but One who is willing to suffer and die to redeem us. That's what it means that "**God was in Christ, reconciling the world to Himself**" – and think how much that shows us! We have the kind of God who put Himself on the line, paid any price to win us forgiveness – not because our sins don't matter but because we matter more! We have the kind of God who went all the way, did everything necessary to guarantee us eternal life – not because we deserve it, but because He loves us with such infinite love! And whatever questions we still may have, they have to deal with the proof of God's love in "**Christ crucified.**" Whatever doubts we still may harbor, they have to deal with the proof of God's love in "**Christ crucified.**" That's really all we have to go on. And friends, we need to go just on that! Whatever holes there may be in our knowledge, whatever gaps in our understanding, let's not allow the inner egotist to fill them in with baseless assumptions. Instead, let us focus on what we do know, what God has revealed, what gives assurance come what may: the vivid, powerful, indisputable proof of God's love revealed in "**Christ crucified.**"

You know, even as a little kid, I remember being moved to tears by "**Christ crucified.**" When I heard the story in Sunday School, I remember thinking, "How could they do that to the Son of God?" Now, as an adult, I marvel even more, because I know it wasn't just done to Him; Christ came to atone for my sins, He willingly died in my place, and there on the cross, "**God was in Christ, reconciling the world to Himself.**" Yes, I know the theology is more intricate than that. I know it was God the Son, second person of the Trinity, who died. But fine points aside, God was there, there on the cross, and that's the bottom line! He wasn't separate from Christ, sitting up in heaven. He wasn't doing this to Christ, untouched by it all. "**God was in Christ**" – in "**Christ crucified**" – out of love for you and me. And that's what matters! Come what may, even when life dishes out its worst, this shows what kind of a God we can count on: one who has proven He is a God of love in "**Christ crucified.**" Amen.

