

Many Waters Cannot Quench Love

In a book called "Death on a Friday Afternoon" Father Richard John Neuhaus in his meditation on Jesus' word to the thief "Truly, I say to you, today you will be with me in paradise" writes:

"For paradise we long. For perfection we were made. We don't know what it would look like or feel like, but we must settle for nothing less. This longing is the source of our hunger and dissatisfaction that mark our lives; it drives our ambitions. What we long for is touched in our exaltations, in our devastations it is known by its absence. This longing makes our lives and friendships possible, and so very unsatisfactory. The hunger is for nothing less than paradise, nothing less than perfect communion with the Absolute - with the Good, the True, the Beautiful. Communion with the perfectly one in whom all the fragments of our scattered existence come together at last and forever. We must not stifle this longing. It is a holy dissatisfaction. Such dissatisfaction is not a sickness to be healed, but the seed of a promise to be fulfilled. (Death on a Friday Afternoon Richard John Neuhaus).

As we come to the end of the Song of Songs this morning, it is this theme that is the most important one in the book. For while it is a book that speaks with eloquence about the love between a man and a woman, it is most of all a book about intimacy with God. There is infused throughout its chapters a longing for relationship and the affirmation that in the end the paradise and perfection Father Neuhaus refers to will be attained.

This is affirmed in the verses read today: "Love is strong as death, passion fierce as the grave. Many waters cannot quench love, neither can floods drown it."

As we enter into Holy Week these words find their fullest expression in Jesus' passion. As I mentioned a couple of weeks ago it became the custom for the Jewish people to end the Passover Celebration with a reading of the Song of Songs. In Mark 14.26 the evangelist tells us: "When they had sung the hymn, they went out to the Mount of Olives" It is probable that the hymn referred to here is the Song of Songs. To think that Jesus' last reading with the disciples came from the Song of Songs gives the book even greater significance. Here in chapter eight is the theme not only of the book but of Jesus' whole earthly life "Love is strong as death, passion fierce as the grave. Many waters cannot quench love, neither can floods drown it." Indeed as the Resurrection

will show, Love isn't as strong as death, it is stronger than death. And because this is true, we can take to heart what Father Neuhaus says about paradise and perfection regardless of how elusive it may seem to us at present.

How do we live in such a way that the seed of longing for paradise and perfection is nurtured in our lives? We begin by recognizing that we were created primarily for communion with God. Everything else in life is secondary.

All of the language in the Song of Songs that we have looked at in terms of human relationships is to be seen at a deeper level speaking about our relationship with God. When it says in verse chapter eight "Many waters cannot quench love, neither can the flood drown it" love is imagined here as a fire. Nothing can put out the fire of the love of God. Nothing we have done can extinguish God's love for us. This is a theme that comes through with such clarity during Holy Week. As we look to the disciples we see them forsake Jesus but he doesn't forsake them.

When you receive in your heart the promise that nothing can extinguish God' love for you it can transform your life. Your doubts, struggles, denials, failures, heartache, broken relationships, all of the floods, are not greater than the fire of God's love.

St. Paul knew this as well as anyone who has ever lived. In the second chapter of Philippians he is trying to express to his readers the depth of Jesus' love for them but he doesn't quite know how to do it. He wants them to have love, one for another, the way that Christ loved them. He starts out by asking, "What have you received from Christ?" Have you received encouragement? Did you find comfort? Perhaps you have enjoyed the fellowship of the Holy Spirit? Maybe you have experienced the tenderness of God. Perhaps you felt His compassion? If you have received any of these things, Paul says, then love one another, consider others as more important than yourselves.

And it is then that the Apostle Paul attempts the impossible. He wants to describe the mind of God when God decided to become human. Now there is a tall order! What was God thinking when he landed upon his plan to send his only Son in the form of human flesh. What was the attitude of God's Son when Christmas was conceived in the mind of the Father?

One line of this passage is "He emptied himself" The Greek word for this

self-emptying is kenosis. It is the surrender of all that we hold most dear. Because of his love for us God emptied himself of his majesty and glory and became fully human. God becomes man in Christ. St. Paul writes: Though he was in the form of God Jesus did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. Paul wants us to learn something from it. He asks, when God emptied himself what did we learn. It's a provocative question. Let's take a look:

I

First, when God emptied himself we learned that love encourages. Paul understood the power of an encouraging word. The Philippians needed that kind of encouragement. They were trying to keep a church going in difficult circumstances. Their city was the retirement home for many of Rome's greatest military figures. The city served as the frontier city for Rome in Macedonia. The citizens prided themselves on being Roman, they dressed like Romans and lived like Romans. The city was named after Alexander the Great's father King Philip II. This city was the epitome of Roman lifestyle.

Paul not only encouraged the Philippians to live for Jesus in a setting where they were few in number they encouraged Paul by sending him gifts and letters when he was imprisoned in Rome. So Paul in kind writes to Philippians and says, "I thank my God every time I remember you. I pray with Joy because of your partnership in the Gospel." Where did Paul learn the importance of an encouraging word. He learned from Jesus. And he wanted the Philippians to remember that this was the source of their encouragement.

Encouragement is always needed but particularly in those circumstances when we are feeling discouraged. When we are discouraged we lose heart. We cannot see things clearly because we have lost perspective. At a time like this the encouragement of another can help us to persevere. Never underestimate the importance of encouragement in your dealings with others.

II

When God emptied himself we learned that love encourages. Secondly we learned that love is tender.

We would do well to remember the patience and tenderness that Jesus demonstrated toward us when he saw that the masses were hungry and he fed the 5000. When he saw the sisters of Lazarus weeping for their lost brother he wept too and brought him back to life. When he looked down upon Jerusalem and said, O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, how I have longed to gather your children. When he looked down from the cross upon his mother Mary and the disciple he loved John standing beside her and said, "Woman, here is your son." He then turned to John and said, "Here is your mother." In his greatest hour of distress, he was kindhearted. For you see, when God was nothing we learned that love is tender.

As we recall the Song of Songs this is a way we could describe the speeches that the man and woman direct to each other. They were tenderhearted. To have a tender heart is to have an affection and longing for another that grips the whole personality. Jesus has this kind of tenderness for us and as we live in his love we in turn can express this kind of tenderness to one another.

III

Finally we learned that love is self-emptying. That is perhaps the most dramatic and most distinctive mark of love. That it empties itself on behalf of another. Paul uses this image by saying that God poured himself out in Jesus Christ. God does not simply love us from some distant place in heaven. He loves us here by coming and serving us. The great irony is this: God came to serve us when in fact it is we who should be serving God.

Love empties itself and serves others. That's what love does. But Paul reminds the Philippians that Jesus does not relinquish his place in heaven and become a man so we can feel good. He pours his love into us so we can give it back to the world.

Look how Paul words it in our text this morning: "In humility regard others better than yourselves. Let each of you look not to your own interests but to the interests of others." It is this message that the Song of Songs emphasizes is to be at the heart of how husbands and wives treat each other because their love is to be a reflection of God's love.

The greatest challenge in discipleship is to link ourselves to the power of God's love. We can only continue to love as long as we know that we are loved. We can only

continue to encourage one another as long as we know the encouragement that comes from Christ our brother, Lord and Savior. We can only continue in tenderness because God in Christ has brought to this harsh world his divine tenderness.

As we experience more fully the encouraging and tender love of Christ by His Spirit and through the encouragement and tenderness of others we will know that many waters cannot quench love and continue to live with the longing for paradise and perfection all the days of our life.