

The Love of God

Thomas G. Long

Candler School of Theology, Emory University, Atlanta, Georgia

Without doubt, there is still a long way to go in order to understand or guess that the wrath of God is only the sadness of love.

Paul Ricoeur¹

The parking lot of the church where I will soon preach has a few cars in it, and others are gradually arriving. Not like the old days, of course, when one had to come early to find a spot. But these aren't the old days. The world has changed, society has changed, the church has changed. Inside I will find a cordial enough group, certainly hospitable to the guest preacher. It will tilt grey, but still there will be an encouraging scattering of children and younger families. This is a bright, well-educated, amiably progressive suburban congregation. On bumpers here and there I see stickers reading "God bless *all* nations," "Coexist," and "God Loves Everyone—*No* Exceptions." That's good, because somewhere in my sermon I will remind them of these very things—that God *is* love, that God loves all people, and that, indeed, God loves them. I will then close the service with the familiar blessing, "The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with all of you." Chances are they won't believe a word of it.

They wouldn't say, of course, they don't believe God loves them. No, to the contrary, they would chime with the bumper slogan "God loves all people – no exceptions," including them. Unlike that church across town, where the preacher shakes the congregation with fear and guilt every week and hell reaches out long red fingers of sin and shame,² and in contrast to that church a few blocks over, where the flag waves proudly on the jumbo screen as the choir pumps fists and sings "God Bless the USA," this congregation firmly proclaims the inclusive embrace of a God whose love knows no bounds. But they have said it so often, they have heard it so often, that the bite has gone out of it. The idea of God the Lover does not much amaze them, encourage them, console them, or even arouse much interest. That metaphor, if not dead, is on life support. Well-meaning preachers like myself smile and reassure them constantly, "God loves you," and they smile thinly back and inwardly say, "Why, of course." The startling announcement, that the redeemer of all creation is a passionate lover who seeks them out as the beloved, rolls over them with all the blandness of "Nice weather, right?"

Part of the problem is with the word *love* itself, which has become in popular culture as hyper-inflated as the currency of Belarus. Paul McCartney croons in amazement that people haven't yet grown weary of "silly love songs," and, it's true, we haven't. We're saturated with them. In movies, music, television shows, blogs, and more, the word *love* is a constant refrain, a barrage really, so much so that the term gets distorted and trivialized. "Don't you believe in love?" the novelist Walker Percy once asked, and then answered his own question: "Yes, but the word has become polluted. Beware of people who go around talking about loving and caring."³ In the 1970s, when he had just read the novel *Love Story*, with its hopelessly sappy line "Love means

never having to say you're sorry," Percy noted that most readers would not need an emetic to feel nauseated. "Maybe there are times," Percy said, hyperbolically, "when an honest hatred serves us better than love corrupted by sentimentality, meretriciousness, sententiousness, cuteness."⁴ Indeed, when "God loves you!" evokes the image of some cosmic Barry Manilow blowing kisses toward humanity and tossing around heavenly valentines, it's difficult to take the idea seriously.

In scripture, in liturgy, and in the language of the Christian faith, however, the love of God stands in sharp contrast to the sentimentalized versions of love that float around in popular culture. All the more reason, then, to let scripture and discerning theology do some teaching about what is really at stake when we say at the close of our worship, "The love of God... be with you all." There are many things one could say about God's love, but decent headway can be made if we start with how playfully free, passionately particular, and dramatically transformative is the love of God.

Playfully Free

Take any romantic movie—*When Harry Met Sally* will do—and much of the pleasure in watching it comes in seeing the trusty, well-worn gears of an ancient and oft-told plot grind toward the predictable conclusion. We know that the future lovers will meet and, from that moment on, the orbits of their lives will circle around each other. But the pairing up that we know lies surely ahead will take some time. There will be trials and tests; unexpected obstacles along the way; anger, disappointment, and perhaps a few laughs, but inevitably the plot clatters toward the finale as Harry and Sally find true love in and with each other. The old storyline doesn't disappoint. Two people who were somehow incomplete and alone before move inexorably toward the place where they "have each other." No matter how many times we encounter this story and in no matter how many versions, it never fails to be deeply satisfying.

The text of these romantic escapades is about joy, fulfillment, and ecstasy, but there is also a strong subtext about need and possession, even consumerism ("I'll have that one").⁵ "For once in my life," sings Stevie Wonder, "I have someone who needs me." There is much self-love and possession of the needed object of desire in human romantic love.

The love of God is different. James Weldon Johnson's powerful poem "The Creation" has God saying, "I'm lonely—I'll make me a world," but theologically this is off pitch. "I'm a lover—I'll make me a world" is more in tune. The Apostles' Creed has the chronology right when it affirms, "I believe in God the Father Almighty, maker of heaven and earth." That is, God was a parent before God was a creator, and the creation was generated not by the loneliness and need of God, but out of deep parental love. As Calvin said, commenting on 1 John 4:9: "For if it be asked, why the world has been created, why we have been placed in it to possess the dominion of the earth, why we are preserved in life to enjoy innumerable blessings, why we are endued with light and understanding, no other reason can be adduced, except the gratuitous love of God."⁶

In his book *God's Undertaker: Has Science Buried God?* John C. Lennox points out that a number of scientists today see the question "why is there a universe?" as futile because there is no rational reason for the universe.⁷ Some of the so-called "new atheists," like Richard Dawkins and Christopher Hitchens, have seized on this point as counter evidence to what they see as the delusions of faith and the claims

of the faithful that the universe is the result of an intelligent design. Science, say the skeptics, can face up to the hard facts, to the arbitrariness, randomness, and pointlessness of reality, whereas religion is but a superstitious attempt to explain the universe as the grand architecture of some alleged Supreme Intelligence. Responding to this, Terry Eagleton quips that thinking of religion as “a botched attempt to explain the world... is like seeing ballet as a botched attempt to run for a bus.”⁸ When the new atheists revel in the pointlessness of the universe, they are, claims Eagleton, unwittingly at one with good theology. Like Calvin, Eagleton insists that the creation exists not out of some grim instrumentality of a higher rationality, but out of the pleasure, joy, and love of God, playfully free, in the act of creation. The only reason for the creation is the reason of love. Eagleton says,

God the creator is not a celestial engineer at work on a superbly rational design that will impress his research grant body no end, but an artist, and an aesthete to boot, who made the world with no functional end in view but simply for the love and delight of it.

He made it as a gift, superfluity, and gratuitous gesture—out of nothing, rather than out of grim necessity.... He created it out of love, not need. There was nothing in it for him. The Creation is the original *acte gratuit*.⁹

What this means when the liturgy offers the blessing “the love of God be with you all” is that the blessing of God’s love comes freely and without constraint. God does not love out of need but out of freedom. Love flows and splashes from the fountain of God’s own life. “Because God is the Holy Trinity,” writes theologian Miroslav Volf, “God’s eternal love can be self-giving love rather than self-centered love. Consequently, God’s love for humanity is a freely given love rather than a love motivated by the benefits that the object of love holds for the one who loves it.”¹⁰

God’s love flows toward humanity, even when it is not reciprocated. On this point, the historical theologian Robert Calhoun helpfully contrasts the understanding of God’s love found in 1 John with the philosopher Philo’s understanding:

John alone among biblical writers ventures to define concretely and succinctly *what* God is—not merely to affirm *that* he is or what he does.... Above all “God is love” (1 John 4:8, 16). In Philo’s thought, love is a duty toward God, a duty whose fulfillment is human well-being (*eudaimonia*) and a reciprocal benevolence of God towards those who love him. But for John, it is hardly too much to say that the essential being of God is love, even toward those who do not love him. “We love because he first loved us.” “In this is love, not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son (1 John 4:19, 10).¹¹

For Philo, love was a duty humans have toward God; for John, love is a gift from God toward humans.

Passionately Particular

In 2003, John Kerry, then a US senator and presidential candidate, gave a piece of tortured logic when he tried to explain his position on funding the war in Iraq. “I

actually did vote for the \$87 billion,” he said, “before I voted against it.” It was, a chagrined Kerry later admitted, “one of those inarticulate moments.”¹² Perhaps, but sometimes a little twist in logic is called for. Take that bumper sticker “God loves all people – no exceptions.” Actually, Christians are against this theological claim before they are for it.

To start with the universal love of God—God loves all people, no exceptions—is to bypass the biblical story and to substitute a gaseous Enlightenment deity for the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. As Jewish theologian Michael Wyschogrod rightly insisted, the biblical story is not about a God who smiles benignly and impartially toward all humanity but instead about a God who falls in love with Abraham, Abraham in particular, and who loves Abraham and his children above all others. “It is the proclamation of biblical faith,” says Wyschogrod, “that God chose this people and loves it as no other, unto the end of time.”¹³ Why Abraham? Why the Jews? As is the case with creation, there is no rational reason. God created the world and chose Abraham out of the same impulse—for the sheer love and delight of it.

To say that “God chose this people and loves it as no other” may grate against our sensibilities, peel off our bumper stickers, and undermine our easy sermons claiming “God loves everyone, friends,” but it is nonetheless an essential claim for the Christian faith. We worship a God who loves passionately and with particularity. I once had a mild argument with an ethicist colleague who was making a case for a certain form of equity justice, namely that a truly just society is one in which justice is like the blindfolded statue and every person is treated exactly the same. She backed up her argument by telling me about an incident with her two young children. When she discovered them fighting over a candy bar, she told her older child to divide the candy bar in half, one piece for herself and the other for her sister. When the older child did as she was told, my colleague then invited her younger daughter to pick which of the two pieces of the candy bar she wanted for herself. It was a nice solution since the one doing the dividing was not the one doing the picking, thus putting incentive in the system to be completely fair in doing the dividing. Society, my colleague argued, would benefit from such fairness, impartiality, and equality.

That may work well for dividing Hershey bars and Social Security benefits, but it is less successful in plumbing the character of human need and desire. At our depths, we do not desire to be treated with impartial indifference; we wish to be known, understood, treasured, treated as we are in our very particular humanity. In fact, the candy bar incident does not really describe the most important ways that my colleague, a very loving mother, actually treats her children. She does not show her love to them blindly and equally, dividing things right down the middle, but very particularly. If one of them has the flu, she does not desert her bedside after 45 minutes in order to give precisely equal time to the other. If one of them comes home from school crying because the “popular” girls fenced her out, she is the daughter who gets that day an extra helping of motherly affection. In the law courts and other public spaces, we may desire that justice wear a blindfold, impartially dispensing benefits in equal portions. But we want parents—and we want God as our parent – not to wear blindfolds, but instead to see us in all our needs and particularities with the eyes of tenderness and love.

In his *Between Parent and Child*, the psychologist Haim Ginott tells the story of a ten-year-old boy named Andy who asked his father, “What is the number of aban-

donated children in Harlem?” Andy’s father, an attorney, was pleased that his son was interested in social issues, and he gave his son a lecture on the topic and then looked up the number. But Andy had more questions. What is the number of abandoned children in New York City? In the United States? In Europe? In the world? Ginott writes,

Finally it occurred to Andy’s father that his son was concerned not about a social problem, but about a personal one. Andy’s questions stemmed not so much from sympathy for abandoned children as from fear of being abandoned. He was looking not for a figure representing the number of deserted children, but for reassurance that he would not be deserted. Thus his father, reflecting Andy’s concern, answered, “You’re worried that your parents may someday abandon you the way some parents do. Let me reassure you that we will not desert you. And should it ever bother you again, please tell me so that I can help you stop worrying.”¹⁴

When my son was a child, there were times when he was feeling frightened or perhaps ashamed of something, and he would ask timorously, “Do you love me, Daddy?” It would have been cold comfort, indeed, if I had replied, “Of course, son, I love *all* children.” And this is a clue to why congregations hear the words “God loves you” with such dispassion – because as a general overarching idea, as a first principle, the universal love of God is a dispassionate and cold concept. This is similar to why many in the “Black Lives Matter” movement resist the substitution of the seemingly more inclusive “All Lives Matter.” “Black Lives Matter” is a cry for justice when black women are escorted from stores because they were shopping while black, when black young adults get overlooked in the job market, and when unarmed black men get shot in the back by police. “All Lives Matter” may be philosophically true, but in operation it can become a license for indifference and for ignoring the great disparities in our society.

God is not like the planet Venus, distant and cold, shining monochromatic love on all peoples. “God loves all people” is not where we start. “God loved Abraham” is where we start, and “God loves all people” is the astounding omega point of this love story. As Wyschogrod again says, “The wonder is that nations not of the stock of Abraham have come within the orbit of the faith of Israel, experiencing humankind and history with Jewish categories deeply rooted in Jewish experience and sensibility. How can a Jewish theologian not perceive that something wonderful is at work here, something that must in some way be connected with the love of the God of Israel for all his children, Isaac as well as Ishmael, Jacob as well as Esau?”¹⁵

Christians can go even farther. Ephesians summons our memory of the dramatic and unexpected opening into the family of God created by Christ:

Remember that you were at that time without Christ, being aliens from the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world. . . . So he came and proclaimed peace to you who were far off and peace to those who were near; for through him both of us have access in one Spirit to the Father. So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are citizens with the saints and also members of the household of God, built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the cornerstone. (Eph. 2: 12, 17-19)

This is no bland announcement of God's universal love. This is the breathtaking proclamation that the God who fell in love with Abraham has, through Christ, also fallen in love with us and knocked down the walls that kept us out of the family of God. This is not about a God who floats over humanity in a celestial blimp beaming loving thoughts toward all. This is about a passionate lover God who, in Jesus Christ, came into the strife and anger and hatred and enmity and brokenness of humanity and, out of loving kindness, made peace. This was the news that knocked Paul into the dust of the Damascus Road. Paul knew the biblical story, and he knew that "God loves all people" is not where that story starts. What knocked him to the ground was the astounding, almost unbelievable, discovery that, in Christ, the love of God for all nations is where it all ends. "For this reason," Ephesians says, "I bow my knees before the Father from whom every family in heaven and on earth takes its name" (Eph. 53:14).

As for the bumper sticker "God loves all people—no exceptions," it may have its usefulness as a political statement in a jingoistic society, and the idea itself isn't wrong. God does love all people. But if this universal love is the expression of some abstract first principle, the expression of a deity who could never show partiality and who divides all candy bars exactly in half, it isn't the wrong idea, but it is the wrong god.

In worship, then, when the blessing says "the love of God... be with you all," it is the passionate and particular love of God that is being announced, the love of God who in ways we can hardly imagine sees us, knows us, counts us as beloved, and desires us, the love of the Good Shepherd who comes seeking us in the wilderness and who tenderly carries us home. As Rowan Williams says, "We are seen, known, and held, but above all we are welcomed. We are the objects of an eternal delight."¹⁶

Dramatically Transformative

God does not love us out of need, does not possess us out of insecurity, but God does desire that we reciprocate with love—not for God's sake, but for ours. "God," said Søren Kierkegaard "has only one passion: to love and to wish to be loved." Because of this passion, said Kierkegaard, God comes to us in many modes of loving: "Now he would be loved like a father by his children, now as a friend by a friend, then he would be loved as one who merely gives good gifts, now like one who tests the beloved; and in Christianity the idea is, if I dare say so, to be loved like a bridegroom by his bride...."¹⁷

A father (and a mother), a friend, a bridegroom—yes, these are the faces of a loving God, but sometimes the loving face terrifies because God the lover desires that we be drawn toward God, that our cold hearts be melted, that our lives of resistance be transformed into love for God. Even what we call the wrath of God is a form of the love of God. In his own moment of turning to Christ, C.S. Lewis experienced this severe love:

Amiable agnostics will talk cheerfully about "man's search for God." To me, as I then was, they might as well have talked about the mouse's search for the cat. Remember, I had always wanted, above all things, not to be "interfered with." I had wanted (mad wish) "to call my soul my own." I had been far more anxious to avoid suffering than to achieve delight. I had

always aimed at limited liabilities.

You must picture me alone in that room in Magdalen, night after night, feeling, whenever my mind lifted even for a second from my work, the steady, unrelenting approach of Him whom I so earnestly desired not to meet. That which I greatly feared had at last come upon me. In the Trinity Term of 1929 I gave in, and admitted that God was God, and knelt and prayed: perhaps, that night, the most dejected and reluctant convert in all England. I did not then see what is now the most shining and obvious thing: the Divine humility which will accept a convert even on such terms. The Prodigal Son at least walked home on his own feet. But who can duly adore that Love which will open the high gates to a prodigal who is brought in kicking, struggling, resentful, and darting his eyes in every direction for a chance of escape? The words *compelle intrare*, compel them to come in, have been so abused by wicked men that we shudder at them; but, properly understood, they plumb the depth of the Divine mercy. The hardness of God is kinder than the softness of men, and His compulsion is our liberation.¹⁸

“Abide in me as I abide in you,” Jesus said (John 15:4). To be loved by God is to be drawn toward God. To be drawn toward God is to be transformed into the likeness of God. “Dwell and you will be a dwelling,” preached Augustine. “Abide and you will be an abode.”¹⁹ To be loved by an abstract God who radiates love toward the creation indiscriminately is no threat. To be pursued by the God who loves us with passion and who desires a mutual indwelling—God abides in us and we in God—can evoke fear because this kind of love calls for a loss of the old self and the birth of the new. “We may acknowledge that we are loved by God,” writes theologian Janet Soskice, “but it is more difficult to accept that we will be made lovely.” Soskice continues, “The seventeenth-century Puritan clergyman Samuel Crossan spoke more boldly of future promise in what are now the words of a familiar hymn, “My Song Is Love Unknown”: “My song is love unknown, my Savior’s love to me; /Love to the loveless shown, that they might lovely be. /We shall not only be loved, but “lovely be” through the kindness of God.”²⁰

To be transformed by the love of God is to be formed in the image of Christ. This means that we are drawn by God’s love into living in ways that are Christ-like, but this change in us is far more than merely being encouraged to be better, kinder, more generous, more loving people. It is rather, to be transformed by the love of God into being nothing less than a saint. It is the love of God in Jesus Christ that brings us at last into the presence of God’s glory purified, refined, lovely, and redeemed. “So with what body will the dead rise?” asks Jürgen Moltmann. “With the body of love. Not the unlive, might-have-been or wasted life, but the life lived in love will rise and be transfigured.”²¹

So, to raise the hand of blessing over the people of God and to say “the love of God... be with you all” is to affirm the promise that every day mercy is drawing “us all one little pace nearer to Love’s unveiled and dazzling face.”²²

Notes

1 Paul Ricoeur, *The Symbolism of Evil* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1967), 67.

- 2 Some of these phrases are inspired by Lillian Smith, *Killers of the Dream* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1949), 110.
- 3 Walker Percy, *Lost in the Cosmos: The Last Self-help Book* (New York: Picador, 2000), 187.
- 4 Walker Percy, "The State of the Novel," *Michigan Quarterly Review*, 16/4 (Fall, 1977), 359.
- 5 Rowan Williams, *Being Disciples: Essentials of the Christian Life* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2016), 32.
- 6 John Calvin, *Calvin's New Testament Commentaries: John 11-21 and 1 John* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1994), 290.
- 7 John C. Lennox, *God's Undertaker: Has Science Buried God?* (Oxford: Lion, 2009), 62-63.
- 8 Terry Eagleton, *Reason, Faith, and Revolution: Reflections on the God Debate* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2009), 50.
- 9 Eagleton, *Reason, Faith, and Revolution*, 8.
- 10 Miroslav Volf, "God is Love: A Basic Christian Claim," *The Christian Century*, 127/22 (November 2, 2010), 32.
- 11 Robert L. Calhoun, *Scripture, Creed, Theology: Lectures on the History of Christian Doctrine in the First Centuries* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2011), 42.
- 12 David Paul Kuhn, "Kerry's Top Ten Flip-Flops," on cbsnews.com, August 29, 2004.
- 13 Michael Wyschogrod, *Judaism*, 10:4 (Fall, 1961), 352.
- 14 Haim Ginott, *Between Parent and Child* (New York: Three Rivers Press, 2009), 5-6.
- 15 Michael Wyschogrod, "Why Was and Is the Theology of Karl Barth of Interest to a Jewish Theologian?" in Martin Rumscheidt, *Footnotes to a Theology: The Karl Barth Colloquium of 1972* (Waterloo, ON: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 1977), 97.
- 16 Rowan Williams, *Being Disciples*, 34.
- 17 Søren Kierkegaard, *Papirer*, XI, 2, 98, as cited by Walter Lowrie, "The Love of God," *Theology Today*, 16/4 (January, 1960), 484.
- 18 C.S. Lewis, *Surprised by Joy: The Shape of My Early Life* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1966) 228-229.
- 19 Augustine, "Homily 7," paragraph 10.
- 20 Janet Martin Soskice, *The Kindness of God: Metaphor, Gender, and Religious Language* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 187-188.
- 21 Jürgen Moltmann, *The Way of Jesus Christ: Christology in Messianic Dimensions* (San Francisco: HarperSan Francisco, 1990), 263.
- 22 Words found on a sign over the door of St. Peter's Church, near Suffolk, England.