

“His Love Endures Forever”

In the name of him who loved us and gave himself for us, dear friends in Christ: It is the pursuit of science to explore and understand the universe we live in, to describe how it functions and what makes it work, and to try to determine the natural laws by which it operates. And certainly in the past several hundred years especially mankind has made giant strides forward in the scientific endeavor, making amazing discoveries at all levels, from the workings of the subatomic particles of tiny atoms to the mechanics that drive incomprehensibly vast galaxies of stars, and concerning all disciplines and fields of study in between: botany, zoology, geology, chemistry ... and fantastic amounts of new knowledge are being added every day. In fact, our collective scientific knowledge is growing at an increasing rate. Today's scientists understand the world we live in better than ever before, and tomorrow they will understand it better still; but ... but for all the knowledge they gain through their studies and all the incredibly complex questions they manage to answer, there is one piece of information they will never come to through their scientific pursuits – one question that science can never answer. That is the answer to the question “Why?” “Why does the universe exist in the first place?” More to the point especially as it pertains to us, “Why are we here?” “What is our purpose for existing?” “What is the meaning of life?” “What's it all about?” These are questions that science cannot answer.

Now, that's not to say that certain scientists haven't tried; but by and large, the answers they've come up with are not what you'd call entirely satisfactory. The most common answer scientists give us is that life has no meaning. There is no reason “why” to the universe. It just *is*. According to the proponents of this view everything we see and experience is the result of a great big cosmic accident. The problem with that answer is that you don't have to be a rocket scientist to see how foolish it is. In every aspect of its being our universe shows evidence of meticulous and very careful design – and the more we discover, the more apparent it becomes that we and everything else we see have been fearfully and wonderfully made – and if *made*, then obviously *made for a purpose*. Braver, more honest scientists who are willing to open their eyes the evidence and who have not started their inquiries steeped in the presuppositions of naturalism (a philosophy that begins by precluding any possibility of there being a purpose for our existence) admit that there must be an answer to the big question “Why?” The trouble is that the scientific method ill-equips them to find the answer; so they end up either ignoring the question altogether or speculating about it blindly – neither of which is a very good way to handle such an important question.

Fortunately for us, the One who made the heavens and the earth and everything in them has told us precisely what his purpose was for bringing all things into existence. Speaking through the inspiration of his Spirit, he gives the answer repeatedly in the psalm we read together a short time ago. (I'm going to pause here and ask you to turn to it again in your hymnal.) What I want you to see is that after each declaration of the mighty works and wonders that God has done, the answer to the question “Why?” keeps coming back. It's because “His love endures forever”. It's not just a mindless mantra tacked on the end of these sentences; instead it is the refrain that explains God's motive for doing the things he does. Why did God create the world? Why did he stretch out the land and sea? Why did he make the sun shine and the stars sparkle? His love endures forever, that's why. God's love is the answer. It's why we exist. It's why everything exists. And so, though it's a bit trite, according to the psalmist, I suppose you could say that “love really does make the world go ‘round”.

But let it be understood up front that the love we're talking about here is not the emotion of affection we commonly call love in our day and age. This love is not just a warm, fuzzy feeling. When we speak of love, we usually mean “that good feeling I have when I'm near you”. And what we really mean by it is “I like what you do for me”, or “I like how you make me feel”. That is to say we love those who give us something whether it be security, sexual intimacy, a feeling of being needed or desired, or whatever. Our love has to do with getting something out of the deal. The biblical concept of love on the other hand, the kind of love God has, is exactly the opposite of that. The love of God has to do with giving: giving freely, sacrificially, and without any concern about the cost. The love of God gives without any hope of getting something in return. Most of all the love of

God invests the totality of his own being in serving the good of the objects of his love, giving all, surrendering all, and suffering all to do what's best for them.

And it's important for us to understand this. It is the belief of many Christians that the Lord created us to fill some deep-seated need within himself. That is he made us because he wants something from us: our admiration, our subservience, or something like that. Or to say it another way, he made us because he wanted someone to push around and tell him what a swell guy he is. That distorted view of the Lord makes him into tyrannical despot whose primary concern is for himself. It paints him as reaching out to the world half demanding, half pleading, "Obey me! Worship me! Love me!" It's a pathetic portrait—and it misses the truth altogether. Strictly speaking, of course, the Lord has no needs. He certainly doesn't need anything that we his creatures might have to offer him. His whole focus is on what's good for us. And so, when he commands obedience and directs us to love and worship him, it's not because he needs it; but because he knows that that's what's best for us. He wants us to be right with him, to be in a proper relationship with him, because he loves us and doesn't want us to miss out on all the good he plans to do for us in time and *eternity*. His love endures *forever*.

And so we see, as the psalm continues, that not only is God's love the reason for our existence, it also explains all the other mighty acts performed by the Lord. Chief among *these* are his works of redemption and deliverance for his people. So it is that immediately after pondering God's acts of creation, the psalmist directs us to reflect back on the great Old Testament salvation events when the Lord took his people out of slavery in Egypt and brought them to the Promised Land. Because of God's eternally enduring love he rescued his people from what was a terrible situation and gave them a lasting inheritance in a land overflowing with milk and honey—all of which is a picture, as we know, of the greater deliverance he had planned for his people when he would rescue us from the tyranny of Satan and the slavery of sin and bring us to our eternal inheritance in heaven.

And it's here where the love of God gets a little messy. We hear of him smiting the Egyptians with plagues, slaughtering their firstborn children, drowning their army in the Red Sea, and striking down the kings of the lands who opposed the progress of his people toward their goal. The question raised by some is, "If God is so loving, how can he do all these destructive things?" The answer is that it's precisely because he loves that he must destroy those who are trying to harm and oppress his people. What parent wouldn't lash out in fury against someone trying to hurt their child? Love sometimes demands violent action.

And again, this violence mentioned in the psalm is a prophetic portrait of the work of salvation that was then yet to be accomplished when the Lord would rescue his people by slaughtering his own firstborn Son on our behalf. He loved us so much that he gave what he valued most to secure our redemption. And, of course, the death of Jesus on the cross was the only sacrifice big enough to do the job. Nothing short of that would do. That's what we see in the Exodus story alluded to here: though terrible, none of the first nine plagues changed the Pharaoh's mind. It took something massive, the death of the firstborn, to get him to release his grip. So it is with the slavery of sin: no other work or wonder will do. Only the bloody death of God's Son could secure our release from Satan's grasp. But because he loves us, God paid even that incredible price.

Even then, the enemy still pursues us. Satan, like the Pharaoh at the time of the Exodus, still seeks to enslave us again. You remember that the Pharaoh sent his war chariots to recapture the people; but they were all destroyed when the walls of water collapsed upon them. And so what we see (thanks to St. Paul sharing his inspired insights) is that the passing through the Red Sea is a picture of Christian Baptism and how it cleanses our sins, gives us new birth, and destroys the power of the enemy over us. Through Baptism Satan and his forces that seek to enslave us again in sin are destroyed and drowned, as it were. And because of God's great love for us in Christ we can revisit this liberating washing every time we confess our sins and receive again his forgiveness. This is reflected in verse 23 where it says God remembers us in our low estate, that is, when we recognize our weakness and helplessness. It's then, as the psalm continues, that "he frees us from our enemies."

The next line in the psalm about how God gives food to every creature calls to mind today's Gospel lesson in which Jesus looks out and sees this large group of people wandering around like sheep without a shepherd and sits down to teach them. Then, having fed their souls with his Word, which is the Bread of Life,

he takes care of their physical needs as well by miraculously multiplying the fish and loaves of bread. In his love he provides for all of our needs.

And he still does today. Yes, by giving us our daily bread; but even more importantly, by continuing to feed us with the Bread of Life. We see this in today's Epistle lesson where it tells of how the Lord keeps and preserves us in the saving faith through the ministry of the Church. That's why he appoints apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors and teachers: so that we grow and mature in the faith as we ought, and so that we don't get blown off course by "every wind of teaching and craftiness of men in their deceitful scheming." In his love he takes care of all the provisions necessary to bring us home.

And that, finally, is reflected in today's Old Testament lesson in which the Lord brings a select group of elders into a very personal and close fellowship with himself. He actually joins them as they sit down to enjoy a meal that he has prepared for them. And so we have this illustration of how the Lord presides as the host of what amounts to a great big Thanksgiving dinner. It shows the kind of relationship he desires for us to have with him. He wants us to be members of his own family and pull up a chair at his table. We see too what qualifies these elders to come into his presence: first they have to be sprinkled by the blood of the covenant. Without that no sinner could come before the Lord in peace. God would have no choice but to "raise his hand against them" as the text states. But covered and protected by the blood of the sacrifices they can and do see God and live. And what we have here on one level foreshadows the Lord's Supper that we enjoy now in our day. In the Sacrament of the Altar the Lord Jesus himself serves as both the host of the meal and the sacrifice upon whom we dine and also whose sprinkled blood qualifies us to come into the Lord's presence. At the same time, on another level, we have here an illustration of the final feast that will last forever when we come into the place the Lord has prepared for us in heaven. At that feast we too will see God and live – live as his children in his loving presence forever.

And that, as the psalmist declares repeatedly, is what life and the universe is really all about. God's love is the answer to the great big question "Why?" And I don't know about you, but I'd say it's a pretty good answer—as good as it could possibly be. And more than that, because God's love is our reason for existing and for our salvation in Christ Jesus, it should also be our motive for doing whatever it is that we do. You see, by lavishing his love on us the Lord invites us to participate in joining him in his ongoing work of loving the world. He would have us be not just receivers of his love, but more like conduits through which his love can flow out to others. Apart from the gift of his Son, this is the greatest blessing that he gives to us. He loves us so much that he wants us to have the joy of loving as he does. This is what it means for us to be the image of God – the God who is love. It is what we will be doing for all eternity; and by his grace we can begin right now.

Let this then be our goal for the present: to live in God's love for us in Jesus his Son and reflect it, for this is the reason we exist. And doing so today and always, let us give thanks to the Lord for he is good; his love endures forever.

Soli Deo Gloria!