

God's Desire

A Sermon by Rich Holmes on First Timothy 2: 1-7

Delivered on September 22, 2019

When I was a pastor on Long Island, the church I was serving was fortunate to have an active and flourishing nursery school for small children between about the age of 2 and 4. Sophia was a part of it for a while, and Kelly and I were proud that she was a part of it. Now since this nursery school was in the church, as you might imagine, it was not just a place where small children would learn about things like numbers and letters and colors but they would also get some basic instruction on the Christian faith, and that is where I came in. About once a month all the children would visit the sanctuary where they would have what was called “chapel time” and where I would introduce them all to the sanctuary and what that was all about and I would introduce myself and tell them who I was, and then along the way I would tell them some little story. And it was all very cute. The kids would all hold hands and march down from their classroom to the sanctuary. There I would read them some cute story about something like the time someone brought an elephant to church or something, and then they would all hold hands and march back to their classrooms. Well, I tell you all this because I can remember my first chapel time when all the kids came in and sat on the floor and as I was wearing my robe and stole, probably the very robe and stole I have on now, I introduced myself. “Boys and girls, do you all know who I am” I asked. Nobody said anything. Again, I said “Do you know who I am?” Finally, one girl sort of sheepishly raised her hand. “Yes, young lady” I said.

“You’re God.”

Now, naturally I told her the obvious truth that I am not God. But you know, while nothing about me should make you confuse me with God, I think we should take a moment to appreciate what an intelligent answer that was. Here this little girl was in nursery school where she was learning all about God and about how the sanctuary was a place where we go to talk to God, so when you go to the sanctuary and you see someone you don't know, well who else would that be other than God?

Well, if for some reason, whether it is through temporary insanity or through an inflated ego you have ever thought of yourself as anything like God, we have a gentle reminder in our New Testament lesson today that none of us are even close. We hear Paul addressing Timothy today, and as he addresses him Paul says God desires that everyone be saved and come to a knowledge of the truth. In other words, as I am sure you've heard it said many times before God loves everyone and God wishes good will to everyone.

I have sometimes heard people say, "I don't like everyone but I love everyone." I used to go to seminary with a guy who would say that. 'I don't like everyone but I love everyone.' I have no doubt that this was a good person who said that. But I also want to remind you the pronoun "everyone" includes an awful lot of people. You are a good person if you love most people, and you are a really good person if you love everyone you've ever met, but the pronoun "everyone" includes all seven billion people who are alive on this earth—and so, when someone tells me they love everyone, I want to remind them the pronoun "everyone" includes their ex-husband or ex-wife—the one who cheated on them and humiliated them. There were tears and promises and endless couples counseling where despite feeling humiliated they reluctantly accepted that the affair was a symptom of something wrong in the marriage and they accepted

some responsibility for it and they made changes and they did everything they could and then what did their spouse do after all that? Believe it or not, they went out and cheated on them again. The pronoun everyone includes that person. When someone says they love everyone, I want to remind them that the pronoun everyone also includes the kid at school who bullied their son, who made it so he begged and pleaded with them not to have to go back to school, and even faked sick from time to time because he couldn't deal with the shame this bully would inflict on him or the anxiety he would feel in living with constant threats of violence. And I want to remind them they know exactly their son's going through because they still wake up in the middle of the night with nightmares about what a kid just like that did to them in school. And so while they've never met the kid who did this to their son, they know exactly who he is. The pronoun everyone includes that person—And finally, when someone says they love everyone, I want to remind them the pronoun everyone even includes that guy who sexually assaulted their daughter on a date when she was just starting to learn about love and intimacy and trust of the opposite sex, and I want to remind them how they know that from now on every time she looks in the eyes of someone she loves in her mind's eye she will always see the face of the kid who did that to her, I don't care if five years go by or ten years or fifty years go by. The pronoun everyone includes that person, too.

I would like one day to say that I love everyone, but frankly I am not there yet. It is my goal to get there one day. Maybe you say to me, "Rich, I think that should be more than just a goal. I think my pastor should love everybody." Fair enough, but before Rich Holmes can say he loves everybody, he has to begin by admitting what Paul reminds us of today. There is a big

difference between God and me. And I will never love everyone if I go through life pretending that God is anything like me.

Years ago, I was at a Presbytery meeting in Atlanta when people were debating some resolution that came from the national Presbyterian church and you know, I don't remember what all it said or what all it was about, but the gist of it was that people who believed in Jesus Christ and confessed him as their Lord and Savior were not the only people in the world who were going to heaven when they died. Other people were going to heaven, too. Well, you would have thought the world was coming to an end. One guy got up and said I don't know why I should go on in ministry if I'm going to be a part of a church that believes this. He really said that. Some other people used words I didn't know you could say at a Presbytery meeting. People were really hot. Well, you know, you might think it is awful that anyone could suggest that you might run into someone who didn't believe in Jesus in this life when you get up beyond the pearly gates. You might think that is just awful. And you could be right. That may not be the way that you read the bible; that may be completely foreign to everything you've been taught about God. But here's what I think we should be warned about. Before we decide what God should do or shouldn't do, we need to remember that God doesn't see people in this world the way we see them. Paul says that God desires that everyone, everyone be saved and come to a knowledge of the truth, and everyone includes that former spouse who humiliated you, everyone includes that bully who traumatizes your son for no reason other than that he could. It even includes the guy who sexually assaulted your daughter. Believe me, I am not saying you have to believe that everyone is going to heaven. I am not even saying you should feel especially guilty if you don't love everyone all the time. But do not make God into yourself.

Do not think God sees the world the way you see it. For my eyes aren't anything like God's eyes. My eyes don't even come close.

Like everyone else, I would like to think of myself as a nice person. Now, I know the word "nice" is not very descriptive, but I would like to think of myself as a patient person, a kind person, a merciful person, a considerate person, a gentle person, and an honest person. I know that everyone sees themselves in the best possible light, so I hope that these are the ways you see me as well. I hope I am not deceiving myself. But even if I am right, even if I am not deceiving myself at all, I thank God that that little girl was not right about me. I am thankful that I am not God. Because the world would be in a lot of trouble if I was the one in control. The world would be in a lot of trouble if someone who doesn't love everyone as passionately as God loves us was in control.

In 1981 in the state of Alabama, an African American man named Josephus Anderson was put on trial for murdering a white police officer. It was Anderson's second trial, the first one resulted in a hung jury. So for the second trial, the lawyers presented all the evidence, cross-examined all the witnesses and delivered their closing arguments, and then the jury went back to deliberate, but they couldn't reach a verdict either. Two trials, two hung juries. The Ku Klux Klan in Alabama was livid. They wanted to make it clear that no African American in the state of Alabama would kill a white police officer and get away with it. So they decided they would pick out an African American man at random and kill him and publicly display his body in order to send a message. Michael Donald was that man. Michael Donald was a 19 year old African American from Mobile, Alabama who had done nothing wrong, but was targeted by the Klan just because of the color of his skin. So the Klan picked him up, beat him savagely, strangled

him to death, and then left him in a noose hanging from a tree. Beulah Mae Donald was Michael's mother. She insisted on having an open casket for Michael so the world could see what the Klan had done to him. To no one's surprise, the local police in Alabama did virtually nothing about the case but Ms. McDonald brought pressure from local and national civil rights leaders on the FBI for two years before two Klansmen, Tiger Knowles and Henry Hayes were finally arrested tried and convicted by an all-white jury. Tiger Knowles was convicted of violating Michael Donald's civil rights and Henry Hayes received a death sentence for murder.

At his trial, Tiger Knowles turned to Beulah May Donald and as he locked eyes with her, he said "I can't bring your son back. God knows if I could trade places with him I would. I can't."

Beulah May then looked at Tiger and said "I do forgive you. From the day I found out who you all were, I asked God to take care of you, and he has."

Very few of us, very few people in this world can be as filled with the love of Jesus as Beulah May Donald was. That's not being cynical, it's just being honest. Most of us will never love complete strangers as unconditionally as that. But we can at least make a beginning. And we make a beginning, I believe, by refusing to put our own imperfections on God. And it is only when we see the true loving heart of God, that we can start to look anything like God in our own hearts.