

Why We Love

A Sermon by Rich Holmes on First John 4:7-12

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When I was in my early twenties and fresh out of college, I was single and living in Atlanta, Georgia. I thought that college had prepared me well for life as a young man, but I soon found out that I had a lot to learn. I especially had a lot to learn about personal finances. Now, I was not completely ignorant. Unlike some people in this world, even some adult people, I knew enough about the world to know that just because I had checks in my checkbook didn't mean that I still had money in my checking account, but I have to admit that that is about all I knew. I did not know, for example that when I checked my balance in my checking account, that just because my checking account balance said I had money did not mean that I did, because there could be checks floating out there in the ether which had not yet cleared. So I learned that lesson, and I am ashamed to say that I learned it the hard way. One day I was sitting in my little cubicle at work in my office when someone called me from my bank. Now you know when your bank calls you and needs to speak to you immediately, that can never be a good thing. A man's voice came through the phone and he said he regretted to inform me that due to several checks and bank drafts that just cleared, my account was about 600 dollars overdrawn.

"Well, there must be some mistake" I said. "I just checked my balance the day before yesterday. It said I still had about a hundred dollars in it. And I certainly haven't spent seven hundred dollars in the past two days." Well, that is when I learned how checking accounts work.

“Just because you go to the ATM machine or you look at your bank statement and you see that you have a certain amount of money”, the man explained, “does not mean you actually have that amount of money. That is why you want to balance your check book.”

But then there was something else I didn’t understand. I said “Well, wait a minute, you have told me about these overdrafts I have, but they don’t add up to six hundred dollars. In fact, they don’t even come close.”

“I understand” the man said in the kind of tone of voice that told me he had probably had this conversation with other customers a thousand times before. “But you see, if you don’t have overdraft protection, every time you overdraw, we charge you a hefty fee, and that is why you now owe us 600 bucks.”

Well, needless to say, I was in a pretty bad way. I don’t remember how much I was getting paid in those days, but it wasn’t much and I certainly didn’t have an extra 600 dollars laying around. I didn’t have friends who had that kind of money and I could call my mother but she was out of the country on vacation and I didn’t know how to get ahold of her. Plus, my rent was due the next week. So, although I looked forward to doing this about as much as one looks forward to getting a root canal, I picked up the phone and called my father. Now, you see, I knew my father well enough to know that my father would loan me the money, but I was so ashamed to call him that it was almost worse to call him than getting thrown out of my apartment. I just knew he would lecture me about how foolish I had been, how irresponsible I had been, and how I didn’t deserve his help, you know the routine, and I knew that even if he didn’t even say these words there would be such a tone of disappointment in his voice that it would be better if he just said them to me. But as I got him on the phone and started talking to

him to my surprise, I heard none of this. He did tell me that he would only loan me the money this one time, and if this happened again, I was on my own. I accepted that, and then, after thanking him, I said, “Dad, I’m sorry.” And I will never forget, he then said, “Son, I love you. You know that.” And that was the end of our conversation.

It has been four years since my father has passed from this life, and while I know that he told me he loved me lots of times, for some reason this time sticks out in my mind more than any other time. And I don’t know why that is, but I guess it sticks out in my memory more because this was a time when I did not feel that I deserved my father’s love. I felt that what I deserved was a stern lecture dripping with disappointment. And I suppose that it is in those times when we feel we are the least deserving of love that the assurance of love means the most to us.

As we open our New Testament lesson today to First John, we hear these words from the author. “Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God. Everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love. God’s love was revealed among us in this way: God sent his only Son into the world so that we might live through him.” And here’s the part that gets me. The author goes on to say “In this is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins. Not that we loved God but that he loved us, and sent his Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins.”

You know, it wouldn’t take long to be a part of our fellowship here at Northminster before you learn that as a church, we do a number of things to express love for others in this world. Even at this moment in which I am speaking we have a number of things going on in this church

which are part of our efforts to express love for others. We are selling donuts and tickets to a spaghetti dinner to raise money for a mission trip to express love for people in need in Louisville, Kentucky. We are collecting toiletries and other household items for welcome bags as migrant workers return to Ohio to express love for them. At Pregnancy Choices we are using baby bottles filled with cash to help provide for new mothers who are choosing not to abort their babies to express love for these mothers and their children. And just this week we served a free hot meal for anyone who wanted to come and eat over at Reedurban Presbyterian to express love for those who are hungry. We do so many things to express love, and every now and then, every now and then it is worth pausing and reflecting for a moment, and asking why we do these things, because we can forget why we do these things. There are churches in this world, some of which I would be happy to take you to, who have gotten to a point where they have forgotten all about why they do the things they do for others, and so what happens? Well, sooner or later they stopped doing them. So it is critical, it is an essential part of our mission that we here at Northminster reflect every now and then on our reasons for doing these things. We do these things to express love for others, not for the reasons you might think. We don't do these things because the people we help are somehow people who are easy to love. Many of them may not be and in fact, I can assure you that many of them aren't. Poor people, hungry people, sick people are just like anyone else. There are good ones and bad ones. There are hardworking ones and there are lazy ones. There are people with winsome personalities whom you immediately feel affection for and there are others that you just can't stand. So we don't do these things because the people we help are easy to love. Nor do we do these things because we are such good people that loving others comes naturally to us. It doesn't; at least it

doesn't come naturally for me. We do these things here at Northminster, we express love for others, first John reminds us, because God loved us first. God loved us and sent Christ to atone for our sins even when we were most unworthy of God's love.

You know, when I was on Long Island and serving in the Presbytery there, I served on something called the Committee on Preparation for the ministry or CPM for short. Now as you know, we Presbyterians love committees and we have lots of them, we even have committees for our committees, and I am not making that up, we even have committee committees, we have some many committees, but this particular committee was called the CPM. And what we would do on this committee we called CPM is that we would talk to a number of people who were preparing for a life in the ministry, going through three years of seminary, and among other things what we would do is listen to people's stories and hear why they believed they were called to the ministry. Well, I have to tell you, every meeting was like listening to a script from episodes of *Leave It To Beaver*. No one had ever done anything wrong, ever, and everyone grew up with the perfect family, with a perfect mom and dad and perfect siblings, and they had spent their lives so far from the devil they had never even eaten deviled crab. You see, if you have been perfect your whole life, what do you know about God's love? What can you possibly tell others about God's love if you have been nothing but lovable all your life?

We love not because we are so good, and we love others not because others are good, but we love because God is so good. Now, I am sure as I say these things to you I am not telling you anything you don't know. I am not telling you anything you haven't heard before. But we need to be reminded lest we forget. We need to be reminded lest we lose our direction and we get lost in this world.

I can remember when I first started teaching at the University of South Carolina, I thought I had a great idea. I said to my students, “You know, you guys you’re all adults, you’re not children and so I am not going to treat you like children.” I said “We are not going to have an attendance policy in this class, if you want to come to this class you can and if you don’t want to, you don’t have to, so long as you know that you’re responsible for the grade you get in this class.” Now you listen to me tell you this and you might say “Hey, that sounds like a good idea, Pastor Rich.” No, it wasn’t. That was a big mistake. I soon found that giving my students permission not to come to class meant that they just didn’t come at all, and sometimes I would have classes I was teaching that semester where one student showed up. One. It is pretty awkward to teach a class when you have one person show up, let me tell you. Well, in the days since then, I have said to myself, what if I was preaching one day, and only one person showed up to hear me. What would I do? Would I just cancel church or would I preach for that one, what would I do? Well, I was recently talking with another pastor about this, and this person said to me, “Well, of course I would preach for that one.” Without a moment’s hesitation, he said “Of course I would preach for that one. If you believe that Christ would have died for that one person if he was the only person on earth, why wouldn’t you preach for that one?” That’s right. Our Lord Jesus Christ would have been betrayed and denied and abandoned, and go to the cross all over again, just for you. Just for you. In spite of all the sinful, wicked and shameful things you have done in this life, he would have gone to the cross for you and you alone. And when you realize that, how can you fail to love anyone else, in spite of what they’ve done. How can you fail to love anyone else, when God had every reason to fail to love you.