

'For God so Loved the World' – Part 1*'Love makes the world go 'round'*

by Rev. Robert Griffith

In 1963 Paul Anka released a hit song called, *"Love Makes the World go 'Round."* It was a great song, if you're a Paul Anka fan. But in fact there are at least ten other songs out there which are very different to each other, all with this same title. They were recorded by people like Perry Como, The Jets, The Hollies and more recently Madonna and Ashlee Simpson. It's a catchy title and when you think of the hundreds of millions of songs, movies, poems and books there are about love, you could easily conclude that love does in fact make the world go 'round.

Now as disciples of Christ in the Church which bears His name, this phrase takes on a whole new meaning and it probably should be the title of a great worship song because love most certainly lies at the foundation of the whole Christian faith. The gospel and the mission of Christ are all about love. That is probably why the most quoted verse in the whole Bible (John 3:16) begins with the words, *"For God so Loved the World."*

The Bible has a lot to say about our love and how we should show that love to God and to those around us. However, our love is birthed in the love of God. That's why John wrote in his first letter, *"This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins."* (1 John 4:10). Love lies at the very core of who we are, why we were created and it is an intrinsic part of our nature as human beings. Love is central to the mission of Christ, the purpose of the Church, the foundation of life and the essence of our humanity.

So today I am beginning a new teaching series which will explore the foundation of the whole Christian faith and the priority of love. This teaching will affirm what many of us already know but we always need reminding and the encouragement to more fully embrace who we are in Christ. It might even challenge what some of us believe and that's a good thing as long as it drives us back to the Spirit of God Who is the One Who guides us into all truth. It will also give us a clear story to tell the people around us in our community.

It's the greatest story ever told and when people embrace the truth of this story, they are drawn into the loving arms of God and their lives change forever. For as the Apostle Paul said in Romans 2:4, *"It is God's kindness that leads to repentance."*

I firmly believe that evangelism is the natural outflow of a healthy Church. When we truly know who we are and, more importantly, when we know Whose we are and why, then our story is really God's story and God's story will always demand people's attention and challenge them at the deepest level.

But where do we start with such a huge topic as love? Well, according to Maria in *The Sound of Music* we *'start at the very beginning, a very good place to start.'* So let's go back to Genesis as we begin this time together focussing on the priority and foundation of love.

Genesis 2:15-18 *"The LORD God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to work it and take care of it. And the LORD God commanded the man, "You are free to eat from any tree in the garden; but you must not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, for when you eat of it you will surely die. The LORD God said, "It is not good for the man to be alone. I will make a helper suitable for him."*

Let me digress here and make an important point. God created the world and He said it was good. He created a lush garden full of trees bearing fruit, full of all kinds of experiences – sensual, physical and intellectual. He said to this new human He created (and I paraphrase here), *“You can freely eat from the lavish provision of this garden. You are to enjoy life to its fullest. But, in the very centre of the garden, in the very centre of your life, there will be a constant source of frustration for you.”* That’s right, in this ‘good’ garden, before the fall, before sin entered the human world, God said *“Here is something right under your nose every day that you can't experience and you can't know, but will always want to.”* That is to say, God built into our earthly lives from the very beginning, an element of frustration that He did not intend for us to overcome. Just let that sink in.

You see it's not sin that accounts for all of our frustration in life. It's not sin that is totally responsible for all our limitations. It is not the fall of mankind that has given us all of our boundaries. God has given us some. In His good pleasure, in His sovereignty - God has limited us and assigned us frustration to some degree on some level in this life. God is the only One without limits; the only One without any frustrations; the only One Who is totally fulfilled. So when you hear pop psychology saying to you: ‘Sign up for my program and you'll be fulfilled..’ or when you hear the army recruiter say: ‘Sign up and you'll be all that you can be ..’ or when you hear religion say: ‘Follow these ten easy steps and you will reach your highest potential in God,’ you are being lied to. How do you know it’s a lie? It's a lie because in this life, frustration, limitation and a permanent sense of ‘not yet’ has been designed into our human, earthly experience by God.

A lot of people end up feeling guilt and shame because of this frustration and this lack of fulfilment. I have met hundreds of people like this and many are in Christian ministry. When we are frustrated; when we lack fulfilment in some area; when things aren't going as well as they could be or should be in our opinion; frustration can often develop into a personal sense of guilt or shame and there are preachers and well-meaning Christian brothers and sisters out there who will fan that flame of guilt and shame by suggesting our lack of fulfilment is all our fault because of our lack of faith or because of our sin or something we are doing wrong or not doing right. Of course, a lot of our frustration will be the result of our own bad choices; some of it may well be the result of sin - ours or somebody else’s - but some of our frustration is actually designed into our human life by God.

God never intended that we would be totally free from frustration. We are pilgrims on a journey and only when we reach our final eternal destination will we be completely free from this frustrating ‘not yet’ reality. So I think this sense of ‘not yet’ and this sense of ‘there must be more’ is actually a vital part of human life and maybe even eternal life. So if anyone promises you complete fulfilment inside or outside the Church - don't believe it. The Bible doesn't promise you that. God doesn't promise you that. In fact, God promises you a certain amount of ‘not yet’, a certain amount of frustration and longing for completion in this life and He actually says that is good. He created the world that way and when He had finished He said, *“This is good. This is the way it ought to be.”* Ok, let’s leave that important digression and go back to Genesis 2 and see the second thing which God said.

Genesis 2:18 *“The LORD God said, "It is not good for the man to be alone. I will make a helper suitable for him.”*

Now I know this is one of the most quoted Bible passages at weddings and I am sure that 99% of sermons ever preached on this verse in Genesis talk about the marriage relationship. That’s fine because these verses are certainly relevant to marriage. However, today’s sermon falls into the 1%. Which means I want to explore the foundational principle in this verse rather than its specific application to marriage. Of course this applies to marriage, but not only to marriage. There is an underlying principle articulated here which applies equally to all humans, married or not: none of us are meant to be alone.

So while frustration is given to us as part of the human experience by God; while limitations are imposed on us; while there are some things that we long for that will not be given to us fully in this life; and that's the way it's supposed to be; there is one frustration that we are not supposed to endure. We are not supposed to be alone and we are not supposed to feel alone. This is one frustration that God never intended us to live with – not ever. In fact, I would go so far as to say that the vast majority of what God has said and done throughout our whole human history is focused on ensuring that we never again have to endure the emptiness, frustration and debilitating darkness of being alone. God planned from the very beginning for us to have helpers who are 'suitable' for us, which literally means 'comparable to' us and 'compatible with' us. People whom we can love and from whom we can receive love. We were created to love and be loved. I am not just talking about marriage here - not all people will be married and God is fine with that – but all people are meant to be in relationships, in community, in the family of humanity and ultimately the family of God. Nobody is meant to be alone.

So beware when you hear someone say (and it's often to a woman who is on her own), *"Well, the Lord will be your companion and He will be everything to you that you need and desire."* At times single men cop the same line, but not as often. I'm not sure where that idea comes from - but it doesn't come from the Bible and it certainly doesn't come from God. We just read in Genesis 2:18 where God looked at a human being and effectively said: *"Even I am not enough."* According to God we were intended to love and be loved by flesh and blood human beings. To have helpers, to have companions, to have people to be affectionate towards and from whom we can receive affection. That is part of the stuff we are made of and it's essential to our being. There is a longing and a yearning for relationship and community that God built into us and one which God intended would be fulfilled in us during our earthly journey.

Why is this? Well it actually flows from Who God is. We are created in God's image and the New Testament tells us that God *is* love. God is not love in the abstract. God is not love in some moral, symbolic way. God is love in His essence. God is love in relationship - because that's where love functions - in relationships. That is also the dominant theme of the entire Bible. God the Father is the Father of somebody - that's a relationship. God the Son is the son of somebody - that's a relationship. God the Holy Spirit is the helper, the comforter, the counsellor - those are all relationship terms. God is family, if you want to put it that way, and when God created us, that family circle was expanded. God the Father, Son and Holy Spirit have been in relationship or 'community' for eternity - that's essential to who God is. And God said: *"... let us make mankind in our image."* In other words, *"Let's expand the family."* Well-adjusted families often want to do that, don't they? They want to expand their circle. That desire comes from the image and the heart of God.

A well-adjusted, healthy Church family doesn't want a nice little tight community for itself - it wants to expand and embrace many more brothers and sisters. That desire comes from the image and heart of God. So now that we are in relationship to God through the saving life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, God is not just our Creator and our Source, God is our Father. Through the work of Jesus Christ – we now understand that God is Father to us - we are His children. God the Son is our Saviour and our shepherd but He is also our brother. God the Holy Spirit is our comforter, counsellor, advocate, interpreter and guide, but also our companion and intimate friend.

A lot of people are thrashing around looking for meaning and some kind of purpose in life, but it really is very simple. I want to suggest that for you and me and for everyone else in this world, our reason for being created, is to be people who love and are loved. People who receive love from God and from other people and who give love to God and to other people. That, I believe, is the most important part of being human and everything else that you do, professionally or otherwise, is just the foreground detail on the broad canvas of your life.

I truly believe that our primary purpose, when boiled right down, is to receive and to give love and that's why everyone can be a huge success in life regardless of age, race, gender, intellect, physical ability or status. We are all given the opportunity to receive love and to extend love to others and from my experience over the years, I can promise you that if you sincerely connect with what I am praying God will reveal to us in this teaching series and take the time to re-visit this teaching on our website – then God can and will re-vitalise, re-new, revive, restore and re-focus your life and bring clarity and power to your ministry in the Kingdom of God.

In fact, I will go even further out on the limb here and say that a fuller Biblical understanding of love may well be the greatest need in the Church of Jesus Christ. The Church is in crisis across our nation and throughout the western world. Hundreds of congregations are closing every week across the world. Countless hours have been poured into Church growth conferences, books, courses, training programs, evangelism initiatives and strategies to 'fix' the Church. There has been a nauseating number of task forces, committees and councils convened to discuss the problem and the result is always the same: precious oxygen and time are consumed as we knock down another thousand trees to produce the paper on which our strategic plans and vision statements are printed and then filed in a drawer somewhere and forgotten! Year after year after decade after decade we continue to excel at complicating what is so incredibly simple. Love truly does make the world go 'round and a full understanding of the priority and place of love is most certainly what is needed for the Church to grow and touch our nation for Christ. Let John remind us again of the source of that love:

1 John 4:15-19 *"If anyone acknowledges that Jesus is the Son of God, God lives in them and they in God. And so we know and rely on the love God has for us. God is love. Whoever lives in love lives in God, and God in them. This is how love is made complete among us ... In this world we are like Jesus ... We love because he first loved us."*

Jesus gave us a simple, yet profound secret to life when He told us to, *"Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and love your neighbour as yourself."* (Matthew 22:37-39). Receiving love from God and returning that love to God and to those around us – it's all about relationships and for all healthy, growing relationships, you need love – God's love – which *"has been poured out into our hearts through the Holy Spirit."* (Romans 5:4)

If the Church is in crisis it is largely because our personal relationships with God and with each other are in crisis. As we ponder what God might be saying to us and to our Church today, we may like to face some probing questions. How well do we really know God, personally and intimately? How well do we truly know each other? We share buildings, meetings, services, activities, programs and events - but do we share our hearts and lives, our fears and aspirations? Do we share love, intimacy, transparency and the kind of relationships which are the building blocks of a healthy Church? Jesus said, *"I will build my Church and the gates of hell will not prevail against it."* (Matthew 16:18). In order to do that He has to overturn the tables in our temples – in our hearts – and drive out all doubt, fear, guilt, shame and wrong theology which prevents us from entering the holy of holies – which is the very heart of God. Only there will we *"know this love that surpasses knowledge and be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God."* (Ephesians 3:19).

That's what's coming friends, if you seriously engage with this teaching. I believe Jesus is reclaiming the Church which bears His name and that means He wants to reclaim our hearts, our worship, our devotion and our primary focus. Then, and only then, will we see Jesus truly build His Church – right here in our midst – right here in our community.

Let those who have ears to hear, listen to what the Spirit of God is saying to us today.