

“Daisies”

*The Lord your God is with you. He is mighty to save. He will take great delight in you. He will comfort you with his love. He will rejoice over you with singing (Zephaniah 3:17).
Ephesians 3:16-19*¹

Like many of you, I've been considerably helped by the picture of God's love presented in the best-selling book, *The Shack*.² At the end of the book, the author recommends a follow-up book, *He Loves Me!* as “**an adventure into the heart of the God we hoped was truly there.**” I wanted such a follow-up, and was not disappointed. This morning's message is largely crafted from the insights of that book.³

One phrase that God the Father uses repeatedly in *The Shack* is “I'm especially fond of so-and-so,” and I've not been able to get away from that. Can you imagine God saying “I'm *especially* fond of . . .” and then speaking your name? I mean, *really*?

What most of us tend to do in daily life is to make conclusions about God's affection rather as we used to do as children when we pulled petals from daisies:

“I got a raise. *He loves me!*”

“I didn't get the promotion I wanted; I lost my job altogether. *He loves me not!*”

“Something in the Bible inspired me today. *He loves me!*”

“My child is seriously ill. *He loves me not!*”

“I gave money to someone in need. *He loves me!*”

“I let my anger get the best of me. *He loves me not!*”

“Something for which I prayed actually happened. *He loves me!*”

“I stretched the truth to get myself out of a tight spot. *He loves me not!*”

“A friend called me unexpectedly to encourage me. *He loves me!*”

“My car needs a new transmission. *He loves me not!*” (p. 4).

And given such an approach, many of us go through life in a constant state of uncertainty and fear, never certain which God we'll meet on any given day—the one who wants to scoop us up in His arms with laughter and love, or the one who will ignore us or punish us for reasons we can never understand (p. 6). Our approach and our experience tend to reinforce each other, and we end up quite uncertain about what sort of relationship with God we actually have, if indeed we have one at all.

In *He Loves Me!* Wayne Jacobsen notes that the *He loves me, He loves me not* dance in which most of us engage could also be called struggles with what he calls “the favor line.” According to Jacobsen, the “favor line” is that invisible line or bar that tells us whether or not we've met enough of someone's expectations to attain his or her approval. Our parents had such a favor line, and we knew well how to work it. Each of our teachers in school had one; each of our friends had one in the past or has one now; and our boss has one, too. So it's only natural to assume that God has a favor line as well – *He loves me, He loves me not* (p. 45).

Unfortunately, our attempts to manage the favor line frequently cause us to end up where one teenager did: “**Same old thing, Dad. God is good. You are bad. Try harder!**” And that

¹ A sermon by Dr. David C. Stancil, delivered at the Columbia Baptist Fellowship in Columbia, MD on March 27, 2016, SonRise Service.

² William Young, *The Shack: Where Tragedy Confronts Eternity* (Los Angeles: Windblown Media, 2007).

³ Wayne Jacobsen, *He Loves Me! Learning to Live in the Father's Affection* (Newbury Park, CA: Windblown Media, 2007). Page numbers refer to this book.

conclusion causes us to spend much of our spiritual lives alternating between the positions of shame on the one hand and fear on the other—not a very happy place to be, at all.

One of the more famous “favor line” conversations in the New Testament is Jesus’ encounter with the rich young man who ran up to Him, knelt down, and asked, “*Good teacher, what should I do to get eternal life?*” (Mark 10:17). As the conversation develops, it’s clear that the young man really thought he was doing pretty well at keeping God’s commandments, but he was still unsure that he had gained eternal life, and he had little confidence that his present course would achieve it. “What can I do!” he pled.

What the man expected was for Jesus to give directions about how to raise the bar just a little bit higher, but what Jesus actually did was to put the bar forty feet in the air: “*Go and sell all you have and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me.*” I think that both Jesus and the man knew this was impossible. What Jesus really wanted was for the man to give up his efforts to exceed God’s favor line, trusting simply in God’s love, instead.

As we gather on this Resurrection morning, the message of the Cross is that God has fulfilled in Himself *everything* He would ever require of us. **Abandoning our attempts to establish our own worthiness is central to experiencing the power of the gospel.** If we can learn this one thing, it will lead us into the arms of our loving Father (p. 65).

For all this, you and I frequently seem more comfortable fearing and trying to please a holy God than we do loving Him. Yet fear does not lead to love, nor does it lead to real transformation. Fear leads only to temporary changes of behavior. “We all remember that we loved our parents, but that wasn’t enough to keep us from doing things they told us not to do. Only the youthful fear of getting caught and punished was enough to deter us from wrongdoing. Many of us transfer that same idea to God, so it’s no wonder we trust our fear more than His love (p. 81).

Now the fear of God is not wrong—God told us that it was the beginning of wisdom (Proverbs 9:10)—but it’s only the *beginning*. Fear is the first rung on the ladder to knowing the wonder of God’s love, but *love* is the *end* of that ladder. “If you don’t love God,” Jacobsen noted, “you would be well-served to fear Him. At least that might keep you from behaviors that will destroy you and others around you. **But once you know how much [God] loves you, you’ll never need to fear Him again**” (p. 79).

The way that you and I discover the full depth and extent of God’s love is by looking at the Cross. The illustration is inadequate, but consider this: What if your young child were to be diagnosed with a rare blood disease? The doctors tell you that the disease is almost unheard of in children. Though they have a form of chemotherapy that could cleanse your child’s blood and restore him or her to health, the drug is too strong for the child’s undeveloped body to withstand the dose necessary to cure the disease. In other words, the cure would kill them before it healed them.

But there is a way around that, the doctors say. They could mix your child’s blood into your own. You would then contract the disease and they could administer the chemotherapy into your blood. Though it would make you horribly ill and [might] even kill you, the therapy would produce antigens in your blood that could then be transplanted to your child’s body and bring about healing of the dread disease.

Would you do it? Most parents wouldn’t hesitate for a second. And neither did God. The message of the Cross and the empty tomb is that God has already borne in Himself what we could never have borne and survived; and this has produced by His blood just such a fountain of life. Transfused into any person who desires it, the Blood of Jesus can cleanse us of sin and

reunite us with this One who loves us . . . but such trust must still be freely chosen, as has been the case since Creation itself (pp. 121-123).

Satan's lie in the Garden of Eden was precisely calculated to destroy Adam and Eve's confidence in God's trustworthiness; and when difficulties press in around us today, you and I may hear the same whisper in our ears: "If God's not going to give you what you think you need, maybe you should go and get it yourself."

Adam and Eve's troubles began when they lost sight of the trustworthiness of God's love, and **there's only one place where we can relearn the trust in God that was shattered in Eden—at the Cross of Jesus**. When you and I look at the Cross, we see the overwhelming, unimaginable extent to which God's love is willing to go for us . . . and we dare to trust God once more.

Jesus taught us two crucially important principles of trust as He moved to and through the experience of the Cross. Toward the beginning of that last Passover week, as Jesus prepared His disciples for His death, He told them, "*Now my soul is deeply troubled. Should I pray, 'Father, save me from what lies ahead?'*" (John 12:27).

We can well imagine the disciples nodding their heads in approval of that approach, since that's what most of us do, too: "Save me, God! If you get me out of *this*, I will serve you forever!" But that wasn't what Jesus chose to pray. What He prayed was, "**Father, bring glory to your name.**"

And of that choice, Jacobsen wrote, "*In this brief exchange you learn everything you will need to know about prayer and about what it means to follow God in this life. For in every situation you'll ever encounter, you will be offered two options in prayer: 'Father, save me,' or 'Father, glorify your name!' One will lead you to frustration and disillusionment, the other to the greatest wonders in God's heart*" (p. 176).

You and I make this choice not once for our entire lives, but in the immediacy of each situation we face, each day, every day. When we don't get the job we wanted, the raise we deserved, or the medical report we hoped for, the choice is always between "Father, save me!" or "Father, glorify your name" (p. 178).

But Jesus taught us an even deeper and more important lesson of trust from the very Cross itself, as He cried out, "*My God, My God, why have you abandoned me?*" (Matthew 27:46). Stay with me here. Could the Faithful One really be unfaithful to His Son at His darkest moment? Never! Inconceivable!

I'm sure you remember the poem, "Footprints in the Sand," which ends like this: "Lord, you said that once I decided to follow you, you would walk with me all the way. But I've noticed that during the most troublesome times in my life, there is only one set of footprints. I don't understand why in times when I needed you most, you would leave me."

And in this poem, the Lord replies, "My child, I would never leave you during your times of trial and suffering. When you see only one set of footprints, *it was then that I carried you.*"

That was the situation at the Cross, too. The key distinction is the difference between what appears to be the case and what actually is the case. The Bible tells us that Jesus actually became Sin for us (2 Corinthians 5:21), and as that occurred, He surely felt forsaken, but that doesn't mean that He actually was forsaken.

You and I do well to remember that shortly after this anguished cry of abandonment, Jesus gave us the greatest demonstration of trust in the history of the world: "*Father, I entrust*

my spirit into your hands” (Luke 23:46)—to the loving Father He could neither sense nor see. In that utter despair and agony while destroying the power of Sin and setting us free, Jesus did what Adam and Eve did not do: He trusted His Father (p. 128).

I’ll bet that you, too, have felt abandoned by God in some of your darkest moments. I’ve certainly been there. Some of us may be in such darkness right now. And as it was with Jesus, our feeling that God has left us doesn’t mean that God has *actually* left us, but only that we can no longer see or sense Him in the darkness. God is always there, never turning His face away from those who are His (p. 127).

My friends, never again do we need to hesitate to trust this incredible Father and His intentions toward us, even when we lose sight of what God is doing in our lives or when we question His seeming inactivity. Instead of doubting God in those moments, we can choose to believe that He’s doing something greater than we can imagine, and then continue to walk with Him as best we can.

When I can’t figure out what God is doing; when I’ve just messed things up beyond what I can ever repair; when I’m lonely and empty and discouraged, I can still choose to say these words: **“Father, I entrust my spirit into your hands”** (p. 129).

Now while the Cross and the empty tomb really do have the power to free us completely from the roller coaster of *He loves me, He loves me not*; and while *“Father, glorify your name”* and *“Into your hands I commit my spirit”* really are prayers that can anchor our lives through any storm; our Father also knows how difficult it is for us to learn to trust Him. And He is not threatened by our struggle or angry with us as we stumble and meander toward faith.

One of my favorite vignettes in *The Shack* goes like this. Mackenzie, the protagonist, is challenging Papa, the figure who represents God the Father: “But why me? I mean, Why Me? Why do you love someone who is such a screw-up? After all the things I’ve felt in my heart toward you and all the accusations I made, why would you even bother to keep trying to get through to me?”

“Because that is what love does,” Papa answered. “Remember, Mackenzie, I don’t wonder what you will do or what choices you will make. I already know. Let’s say, for example, I am trying to teach you how not to hide inside of lies . . . and let’s say that I know it will take you forty-seven situations and events before you actually hear me—that is, before you will hear clearly enough to agree with me and change. So when you don’t hear me the first time, I’m not frustrated or disappointed, I’m thrilled. *Only forty-six more times to go!*”⁴

So it is that *much of the curriculum required for our transformation lies in the very things we’re most likely to ask God to change*, because some of them are not particularly pleasant. Let me say that again: **much of the curriculum required for our transformation lies in the very things we’re most likely to ask God to change**. That’s why trust born at the foot of Calvary’s Cross is so absolutely crucial if we’re going to be able to pray, “Father, glorify your name.”

But, my friend, **can you even begin to imagine how you might live this day if you were absolutely convinced that God already loves you as much as an infinite God can possibly love?** Can you even begin to imagine how freeing it would be to know that nothing you can ever do will make God love you either more or less?

God has already moved you above the favor line. God is not keeping score. The only question now is whether or not you’re going to choose to trust Him and choose to “live loved.”

⁴ Young, pp. 186-187.

Love will take you farther than law ever will. When Jesus said, “*If anyone loves me, he will obey my teaching*” (John 14:23), what He meant is that if we get the loving right, the obeying will take care of itself (pp. 172-173). **Can you even *begin* to imagine what your life might be like if you were absolutely convinced that your Father in heaven already loves you as much as an infinite God can possibly love?**

*He loves me, He loves me not . . . **He loves me!***