

“The Prayer that was Just Too Simple”

1 Corinthians 13:1-13 ¹

The Third Sunday of Advent: Love

He was one of my very favorite professors at Southwestern Seminary in Fort Worth during the mid-70's. Although it would be hard to prove now, I took four semesters of Greek with him, and I came to appreciate his knowledge and his spiritual insight very much. His name was Dr. G. Lacoste Munn.

There came a day, though, when my classmates and I really doubted that Dr. Munn “had it together.” On this afternoon in the spring of 1977, Dr. Munn announced that we were not going to discuss the day's assignment. Rather, he was going to talk with us about a prayer that had come to mean a lot to him.

I don't remember where the prayer came from, or whether Dr. Munn had written it himself. When I heard it, though, I really thought that it was hardly worthy of a seminary professor, much less an hour of class time. The prayer was just too simple. As I remember it, this was the prayer:

***Dear God, Help me to believe that you really exist.
Help me to believe that you are here, now.
Help me to believe that you think I am a nice person.***

That was it. I'm afraid I don't remember a bit of Dr. Munn's explanation of the prayer, but I do remember joking about “Dr. Munn's Prayer” in the days and weeks that followed. As the world well knows, college sophomores and seminary middlers tend to be somewhat smug and arrogant in their rudimentary learnings, having not yet realized that one primary outcome of seasoned education is to realize how little one really knows. I'm afraid I've been no different, either in college or in seminary. Dr. Munn's prayer eventually passed out of my conscious memory, until I happened upon it one day several years later when looking for something else.

This time, as I reread the prayer, I experienced another well-known phenomenon. As the famous college graduate said in wonderment, “I'm amazed at how much my Dad has learned in the four years since I was eighteen!” It was so with me in that rediscovery more than thirty years ago, and as the years have passed, I continue to be amazed by the simple yet profound wisdom of these three sentences. And as I think about Dr. Munn's prayer, I'm struck by the similarities between the three petitions in the prayer and the three things that Paul said will last forever: **faith, hope, and love**.

Paul lived in Corinth for about 18 months during the years A.D. 50-51. He labored there to found a church, and then to nurture it to maturity . . . which proved to be a tall order, indeed. The letter we call “1 Corinthians” was written several years later, probably about A.D. 54-55, when Paul was living in Ephesus. Paul received word that there were many problems and divisions in the Corinthian church, and his letter addressed these challenges. The Corinthians struggled with issues such as factions and rivalries, sexual misconduct, and various distortions of worship.

In chapter 12, Paul used the analogy of the human body to illustrate how the members of the church are to work together in harmony and in mutual encouragement, offering to each other the fruit of their unique spiritual gifts (12:18). The well-known chapter 13—“the Love Chapter”—is the conclusion of this discussion, and it is prefaced by Paul's word that this final discussion is the most important of all.

¹ A sermon by David C. Stancil, Ph.D., delivered at the Columbia Baptist Fellowship in Columbia, Maryland on December 13, 2020. The Third Sunday of Advent.

The chapter climaxes with Paul's statement that this is "the most important part of the most important part": then he wrote "*And now these three remain: faith, hope, and love.*" And then he says, "Here is the most important part of the most important part of the most important part: **the greatest of these is love.**" On this Third Sunday of Advent, I'd like to look again at faith, hope, and love, using Dr. Munn's prayer as a guide.

The prayer's first request is, "**Dear God, Help me to believe that you really exist.**" This is a prayer for faith. Now the idea of "faith" is frequently misunderstood. Theologian Paul Tillich once wrote that faith "is continually being confused with belief in something for which there is no evidence, or in something intrinsically unbelievable, or in absurdities or nonsense."² Faith is, of course, none of those things.

Further, "faith" is frequently confused with "belief." "Belief" is the agreement that a certain statement or proposition is true. "Faith" goes farther. Faith involves commitment. Faith is believing in, not simply believing that. In the familiar words of Hebrews, "*faith is confidence in what we hope for and assurance about what we do not see*" (11:1).

It may be a bit difficult for some of us to imagine seriously asking God to "Help me believe that you really exist," because we are quite convinced of God's Reality and Presence. Even so, this request is surprisingly profound.

One of the hardest challenges facing persons moving toward faith is the fact that God has structured the universe in a way that absolutely protects our freedom to live in un-faith. That is, while the eye of faith sees evidence of God literally everywhere, it really is possible for persons to look at the very same evidence and see nothing. I have both good friends and members of my family who are in that situation.

You and I actually do have the awesome freedom to *choose* to be either aware or unaware of God's existence. While only the Spirit can reveal the things of the Spirit, you and I have to be willing to allow that revelation to come. It is in this way that belief in the existence of God is a choice, as is the commitment to faith which may—but also may not—follow. To ask God to "Help me believe" is to pray for discernment, since the interpretation of the same observations can lead to very different conclusions.

In the fall of 1974, my destroyer was involved in a massive series of war games in the North Atlantic, near England. The weather was terrible, and for several days it looked as though we might exhaust our fuel supply before we were able either to refuel or to make landfall. Even the Captain was concerned. When at last the storm had passed, we were assigned to the "enemy" side of the games, with the task of intercepting and destroying an Allied aircraft carrier, using simulated missiles.

The sea was still quite rough, and that made the interpretation of radar contacts difficult, but at last we thought that we'd identified the carrier on radar. We tracked it at an appropriate course and speed, and we even saw aircraft landing on it as we studied the radar image. I can still see that radar screen in my "mind's eye."

After being satisfied that this was our designated target, we launched our simulated missiles and reported the attack, only to be told that we had actually targeted an oil platform in the North Sea. We had indeed observed a helicopter landing on the platform, but the "course and speed" had resulted from errors in interpreting the difficult radar picture after the storm.

² Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, Vol. 3, *Life and the Spirit; History and the Kingdom of God* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1963), p. 130.

We had collected the data, studied them, and made a carefully calculated decision . . . but it was wrong. It's because of such a possibility that prayer for faith is meaningful.

Second, Dr. Munn's prayer asks, "**Dear God, help me to believe that you are here, now.**" With this petition we turn from "faith" to "hope." If you and I are going to be able to live from day to day with Hope, we really do need to know that God is with us in the struggles and victories of ordinary life, and this is not as simple as it may sound. First of all, relatively few of the religions of the world have any concept of a God who is here, who is with us, who cares about us.

During the era in which our country was being born, a religious attitude called "deism" was very popular. Deists believed in a Creator, but they thought that after God had made the world, God withdrew from it to see what would happen, perhaps as a computer programmer runs a new program—or an autonomous vehicle—to see whether or not it will crash. For deists, God has nothing to do with us anymore. We have to go it alone. And to have such an attitude is not to live in Hope, but in Despair.

Those philosophers known as existentialists understand such questions. Much of existentialism can be summed up in just one sentence: "Each of us will die, and each of us will face death alone." Pretty cheerful, don't you think?

Jean-Paul Sartre, a major 20th century existentialist, wrote that, "because there is no God, no hope exists."³ Irvin Yalom, an existential psychotherapist, agreed that we live in a universe that treats us with "cosmic indifference."⁴

So what are we to do? We try to provide for our families in an age of future shock that obsoletes our work skills several times a decade. We try to guide our children in an era when the pressures of evil upon them are simply incredible. We try to nurture growing, joyful marriages in a culture that places less and less value upon either marriage or the family. Beyond this, we're confronted with misfortune, with sickness, with COVID, and sometimes with tragedy, even before we listen to the radio, watch the news, or read the newspaper.

Where is Hope? Can we hope, and for what? Well, the Good News is that we do have Hope in the Presence, the Power, and the Love of God, who is with us every moment of our lives, closer to us than our breathing! God is present and involved with us in the "dailyness" of life. God does work in all things for the good of those who love Him. God does invite us into a future that ends in eternal rejoicing. That's Good News! That's Really Good News.

Hope gives an expectancy to daily life that watches for and participates in what God is doing right here and right now. I can only guess, of course, but I suspect that this Hope is something like that which an expectant mother experiences. Her hope is ultimately in the future. That's when her child will be born, that's the joyful fulfillment toward which she moves. And even beyond the time of birth, her eager thoughts race forward to the baby's first bath, her first step, his first word. The future is bright and beautiful.

But there's also a present dimension to her hope. A large part of the joy of being pregnant appears to be just being pregnant! The mother-to-be enjoys decorating the nursery, buying furniture, preparing clothes, and just sitting around feeling special. Joyful expectancy can also be ours, too, amid the problems, the routine, and the humdrum of everyday, because God is here, now.

³ Jean-Paul Sartre, "Existentialism," in William V. Spanos, *A Casebook on Existentialism* (New York: Thomas Crowell, 1966), pp. 278, 282.

⁴ Irvin D. Yalom, *Existential Psychotherapy* (New York: Basic Books, 1980), p. 357.

Faith, Hope, and Love. Can you remember the prayer? “Dear God, Help me to believe that you really exist. Help me to believe that you are here now. **Help me to believe that you think I am a nice person.**” *Not only* does God exist; *not only* is God here, now; God loves you. The truth of the matter is that God delights in you. And that’s what CHRISTmas is really about.

As you may remember, my very favorite verse is Zephaniah 3:17. It goes like this: “*The Lord your God is with you. He is mighty to save. He will take great delight in you. He will quiet you with his love. He will rejoice over you with singing.*” Can you believe that?! Hear it again:

*“The Lord your God is with you.
He is mighty to save.
He will take great delight in you.
He will quiet you with his love.
He will rejoice over you with singing.”*

My friend, God, the Lord, Creator of All, Ruler of the Cosmos, knows you by your name—your whole name, all of your nicknames—and delights in you, and in me! Surely, much of what we say and do does not please our Father, but still He befriends us. The Bible repeatedly says that God loves us. And because 1 John tells us that God IS love, we wouldn’t miss the mark by understanding verses 4-7 of 1 Corinthians 13 something like this:

*“Jesus is patient. Jesus is kind. Jesus does not envy, does not boast, is not proud.
Jesus does not dishonor others. Jesus is not self-seeking, is not easily angered,
he keeps no record of wrongs. Jesus does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth.
Jesus always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres.”*

I like verse 7 even better in the Living Bible as Jesus’ name is added: “*If Jesus loves you, he will be loyal to you no matter what the cost. He will always believe in you, always expect the best of you, and always stand his ground in defending you.*” **Wow.**

My friend, if you’re a Christian, you’re a part of God’s family, and that love is yours, right now. If you’ve never trusted Jesus as your only path to Hope, that Hope is offered to you, right now. And yet, this third and last sentence in Dr. Munn’s prayer is also the most difficult. God offers love and hope, future and purpose to us, if we can accept it.

In the Journey of Faith, eventually it always comes down to this: **can we finally dare to let God love us?** When all is said and done, this is a choice. Sometimes the choice is made readily, when the time for New Birth has fully come. . . .

I’d just finished leading a chapel service at the Naval Reserve Center in Louisville when he walked up to me. I’ll call him Bill. A slim, handsome man in his forties, Bill engaged me first around the topic of the sermon, which I no longer remember. Before long, though, I had the strong sense that Bill had never accepted God’s love for him—he’d never been born again—and that the time was right. We sat down, and I walked Bill through what is sometimes called “the Roman Road to salvation.”⁵

I was reading Romans 5:8, “*But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us,*” when I saw that tears were streaming down Bill’s face. Bill asked, through his tears, “Does God really feel that way about me?” And there, in a Navy classroom, heaven came down and glory filled his soul!

⁵ Romans 3:23, 6:23, 5:8, 10:9-10

As wonderful as that moment was, you and I don't always encounter folk when labor is over and the time of birth is at hand. Just as often—perhaps more often—we meet them in the throes of the pain of spiritual labor that may lead to Hope.

For some of us, because life has brought us great physical pain, repeated rejection, physical or sexual abuse, or other great tragedy, it's not easy to *imagine*, much less to *believe*, that God loves us. Rather than feeling loved, we're screaming inside: "If God loves me, why did this happen?! Why was I not protected?!"

Such questions are worthy of more time than we have right now, but on our own we usually end up, at the deepest level, with the awful conclusion that these things happened to me because I'm a terrible person. *In fact, I must be so terrible that not even God can love me.* . . . It's not such a simple prayer after all, is it?

After years of doing counseling and after years of listening to my own heart, I've become persuaded that one of the most persistent and deepest fears of the human spirit is that fear that if you REALLY knew me, you would reject me. However bold or cheerful we are, however successful and outgoing we may seem, this question lurks around the edges of our souls, often beneath our conscious awareness . . . because it is so *terrible*. **And if God offers no response to this terror, God offers us nothing.**

But there is a response. Zephaniah 3:17 is a response. John 3:16 is a response. The Cross is a response. The Resurrection is a response. CHRISTmas is a response. The whole Bible is a response!

Besides Zephaniah 3:17, one thing that helps me a good deal is the chorus of one of Bill Gaither's songs. It goes like this: "**I am loved, I am loved. I can risk loving you; for the One who knows me best, loves me most. I am loved, you are loved! Won't you please take my hand? We are free to love each other. We are loved!**"⁶ Can you hear the Good News?

My friend, the Good News, at CHRISTmas and at every other time, is that God, the Creator and Judge before whom nothing is hidden and to whom we are accountable for every thought and act, is also our Creator, our Parent, our Redeemer, and our Friend. God knows it all. All of it. *Everything*. **And God still loves you.**⁷ God loves you with a persistent, gentle, passionate love, a love that will transform your life, if you dare to choose to let it reach you.

*Dear God. Help me to believe that you really exist.
Help me to believe that you are here now.
Help me to believe that you think I am a nice person.*

Will you dare to choose to be loved?

⁶ Bill & Gloria Gaither, "I Am Loved," Gaither Vocal Band, 1978.

⁷ Hebrews 4:12-16.