

God: Monster or Loving Parent?

Psalm 22:25-31; 1 John 4:7-21

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The year was 1741. The place: Enfield, Connecticut. The occasion was a church revival. The revival preacher was named Jonathan Edwards, and the title of the sermon was "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God." He began his sermon by reading a passage from Deuteronomy 32: "Their foot shall slide in due time." He proceeded to tell his listeners that they were walking on the slippery slope of sin. In due time, he told them, their foot would slide, and they would tumble into the gaping mouth of hell. How foolhardy, he admonished them, to walk in such a slippery place, knowing that they could fall into the yawning abyss at any moment.

Edwards went on to described in great detail the fiery pit that awaited them, its flames raging and glowing. The devils there were hungry lions, he warned, straining to get at their prey. He told them that they were walking over the pit of hell on a rotten covering that could not be trusted to bear their weight. They were like a spider dangling by a slender thread above the leaping flames of a great furnace of wrath. Because of their sin, they were as heavy as lead, he told them, and they would plunge into the bottomless pit as surely as a falling rock would plunge through a spider's web.

The people of Enfield listened with rapt attention, some holding tightly to the pews so they didn't slip into the fiery pit below, others interrupting the sermon to ask how they might be saved, and yet others moaning in misery or weeping aloud.

To make sure no one underestimated the righteous fury of God, Edwards told them to imagine the fiercest human warrior and the suffering he could inflict. God's wrath, he told them, is far worse, a pain and agony no one could endure, and it would be inflicted without pity upon all who rejected God.

This dire warning about the waiting misery of hell led up to his announcement of God's grace. "Now God stands ready to pity you," he told them. "This is a day of mercy." But woe to those who neglected this opportunity. It was their choice. God could either show them how terrible his wrath is or how excellent his love is. When he reached the sermon's climax, he shouted, "O sinner! Consider the fearful danger you are in." At this point, the congregation broke into such loud shrieks and wails that he could not finish the sermon.

This was not long after the Salem witch trials and just before the American Revolution. Sermons like this brought about what historians now call The First Great Awakening, a religious revival that spread across the American colonies.

Let me ask you a question. When you hear a sermon like that, what comes through most vividly for you? Is it God's grace and love or God's anger and wrath? Does it make you think God is a benevolent being or more like a monster? Sermons like that, which you can still hear in churches across this state, distort who God is. Somehow humans have created a little, angry, vindictive god, the divine expression of an insecure, abusive father, who is essentially the opposite of Jesus of Nazareth, whom I believe was the human face of God.

Like some of you, I grew up hearing sermons like that. Maybe not quite that bad, but sermons that focused more on the wrath of God than they did on the love of God. Church leaders discovered that fear works. Fear of hell. Fear of judgment. Fear of the wrath of the Almighty. True, it works at bumping up the numbers and getting people baptized, but it does not work at creating healthy, mature men and women of faith. I wish I had heard more sermons from I John 4. The word "love" is used 26 times in our text. It is the Greek word *agape*, which is a supreme love, the kind of love God showed in John 3:16—"For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son...."

I John traditionally has been called a letter, like the letters of Paul. But unlike Paul's letters, I John has no salutation, and it does not end like a letter. More likely I John was a sermon or part of a sermon. This is the kind of message they heard in the early church, a message about

the love of God and the imperative that we love one another. God is no monster in this sermon. God is not angry, sucking people into a fiery pit of eternal suffering. No. No. No. God is presented here as a Loving Parent.

John says that love is *from* God and that God *is* love. He was saying that love itself has its origin in the nature of God. God is its source. The One who created the sun and moon and stars, the One who brought creation into being, also created love.

So what is love? We tend to think of Valentine's Day, right? Pink and red hearts. Cupid with his bow and arrow. The slightly risqué cards that lovers exchange with a wink. We think of romance and feelings. In the world of John, that kind of love would have been described with another Greek word: *eros*. We get the English word "erotic" from that word. The word he used in I John is *agape*, that supreme love expressed in John 3:16. It's not based on romance or feelings. It is based on action intended for the good of the other.

Let me illustrate. Are you familiar with the Latin phrase *quid pro quo*? It means "something for something." If you go to the store to buy a bottle of water, you give the clerk \$1.50, and the clerk gives you a bottle of water. That's *quid pro quo*—something for something. If you have two tickets to a ballgame, I might say, "Hey, I'll give you \$50 for your tickets." That's *quid pro quo*—something for something. Fifty dollars for two tickets to the ballgame.

Love in I John is not *quid pro quo*. It is *pro bono*: something for nothing. God chose to give to us apart from our ability or willingness to reciprocate. God has given us a gift, no strings attached. That's love. Here's how John put it:

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.

That's *pro bono*, something for nothing. That God is no monster, waiting like a divine warrior to inflict eternal punishment upon us. No, God is a Loving Parent, the One who is the source and embodiment of love.

Here's something else I really like about the message of John's sermon. He said that when we experience God's *pro bono* love, we will then demonstrate love to others. Not should. We will. These are John's words:

We love because he first loved us. Those who say, 'I love God,' and hate their brothers and sisters, are liars; for those who do not love a brother or sister whom they have seen, cannot love God whom they have not see. The commandment we have from him is this: those who love God must love their brothers and sisters also.

Since we have received *pro bono* a gift from God, we *pro bono* share that gift with others.

I think we all would agree that Mother Teresa knew about loving others. She once wrote that our love of others doesn't have to be extraordinary, the big expressions of love. She said, no, our loving should be more like how an oil lamp burns. An oil lamp burns from continuous, small drops of oil. She said these small drops are the ordinary things of life: "faithfulness, small words of kindness, a thought for others, our way of being silent, of looking, of speaking, and of acting." Then she said, "These are the true drops of love that keep your religious life burning like a living flame." (From *Daily Readings with Mother Teresa*)

The message I want you to hear from this pulpit is the love and grace of God. We have enough of the other inside of us anyway. Meet here the One who loves you *pro bono*, our loving Heavenly Parent. And then out of that experience with God, live a *pro bono* life among others.

Closing Prayer

Love that will not let us go, forgive our distortions of who you are. May Your love so form us that we will spend our love with abandon and risk our love with no thought for our own gain. Amen.