

DOES GOD LOVE ME?
The Rev. Bruce J. Roffey
York United Ministries
at King City United Church
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I remember her quite well. Short. Dumpy. Long, scraggly, greasy hair. Her dress – old, dowdy, dirty. Her fragrance filled the room, but it wasn't at all fragrant. We had just concluded the funeral for her husband. "Can anyone come to your church?" she asked. "Could I come sometime?" I don't remember what I said, but she never came.

If she had come, what would the response of my congregation at that time have been? Polite, I'm sure – we wouldn't want to hurt anyone - but probably reserved. Would you want her to sit beside you? Would you strike up a conversation? Would you invite her to stay for coffee and cookies? Or to come to your church group? Or to Bible study? Or to the book club? If she continued to come for a while, would we ask her to consider contributing to the life of the church by joining one of our committees or becoming a member of our Church Council?

"Can anyone come to your church? Could I come sometime?" In various forms, I've heard that question many times. The people seldom show up. Part of that is because underneath this question is a deeper one. Would the members of the church welcome me and accept me if I came, or would they reject me? And underneath this question is the even more profound one. Would God welcome me? Does God love me?

Have you ever asked yourself whether God loves you? Have you ever doubted the love of God? You aren't alone. All around here today are people who have doubted that God loved them at some time or other. If someone says to me that they have never doubted the love of God, I don't believe them. If I'm wrong about that, then I'm sorry for them. They have never felt the joy of being found and celebrated by God.

If being found and celebrated by God is so joyful, then what happens to you when you feel unloved by God? You are not whole. Something is missing. You don't feel quite right about yourself and your life. You might be anxious and tender to touch. There is a thirst within you. A hunger. You're looking for something, even if you don't know what that something is. Life doesn't seem to have as much meaning as it used to. So much you now do by rote or because it's expected of you, or you expect it of yourself. But it isn't very satisfying. It isn't very exciting. As for the church, it can seem irrelevant. Our presence can feel hypocritical, as if we somehow don't belong. Sometimes we give up or give in. Sometimes we panic. Sometimes we cry. Sometimes we don't even know why.

Something more happens though. The community itself isn't whole. In the parables of the lost sheep and the lost coin, the numbers used, 100 and 10, are numbers signifying wholeness and perfection. The number one signifies unity. The numbers 10 and 100 signify the many united into one. It is so important to recover the one lost sheep, not just for the sheep's sake, but in order to restore unity and wholeness to the flock. Our community is never whole unless the lost are returned and everyone is valued.

I have been a commissioner at our national General Council meetings a couple of times in my ministry. At each meeting, regardless of the issues we are considering, we try to be inclusive, to hear every viewpoint and perspective and to respect it. That's why we don't have proxies in the church. Those attending General Council are commissioners give a commission to do the work of the church. They are not representatives. In order to do that work, to fulfill the commission, they need to listen and to understand others, and to experience the movement of the Holy Spirit among and within the people.

At one of those meetings, we were considering economic issues, particularly unemployment. People who were entangled in unemployment in the area where the Council was meeting were invited for a time of dialogue. Two were jobless. Another was a human resources manager and another a worker in social

services. All four felt helpless and frustrated. All four wondered where God was in all this. Does God love me when I have no job? Does God love me when I must terminate someone's employment? Does God love me when I fail to find the services required to help the jobless? Does God love anyone? It was important for the participants to feel loved by being heard. Moreover, it was important for the wholeness of the community to hear their witness.

Thus so, in any church community it is important for everyone to be heard, for everyone to listen, for everyone to have a voice, for everyone to contribute to the whole regardless of age, gender, economic status, heritage, language or any other distinguishing characteristic. All voices need to be heard to maintain the wholeness of the community.

If feeling unloved by God has such a devastating effect both on the individual and on the community, then why does it happen? Why do some feel unloved by God? Why do we all feel unloved by God at some time or other?

Some, of course, feel unloved, through no fault of their own. Some have never been told that they are loved. More importantly, they have never been shown.

Many years ago, when I was the minister at St. Matthew's in Richmond Hill, there were a couple of young boys outside playing ball. I noticed that they had hit the ball up onto the roof of the church and they were wondering how to get it down. I offered to help them if they would help me carry the ladder outside. They came into the church, and as we walked through one of the lads, said to the other, "What is this place?" "This is a church," was the reply. "I was here once!" I was greatly saddened by that experience.

Surely, when children come to this church, even if small in numbers, we need them to know that this is a place for them. For God's sake, for the sake of the Church, for the sake of the world, but most importantly, for the sake of the children, we need to show them that they belong here and they are loved by God. At their baptism we committed to that. So may it be.

Other times it's because we have become entrapped in the wilderness, entrapped by the culture in which we live.

In the past 10 years or so, I have become increasingly dismayed by the lack of civility and indeed humanity in Western societies. It has become acceptable to say whatever you want regardless of how hateful, untrue and even cruel it is. The "isms" abound. Racism, ableism, ageism, gender bias, religious bigotry. Societies and governments seem to worship money. Economic disparity is rising rapidly as the largest incomes and accumulated wealth belong to only a few percentages of people at the top. How can people feel loved by others and loved by God when governments and the people who elect them, me and you, don't seem to care?

Most people are so involved in earning, having and doing for ourselves that one day in a rare moment of silence and stillness we wonder, where is God in all this? Does God love me? Does God love anyone? Then we either panic in free-floating anxiety, or it passes as we find something else to do and occupy us.

Sometimes we don't know the love of God because of others who are supposed to be God's people. Do you know how a flock of sheep stays together? They baa to one another. Sheep have poor eyesight. So, while they are grazing they stay close to one another by listening to the voices of the other sheep. So, if the flock doesn't want a certain sheep to be part of their flock, when the sheep calls, they don't answer. They just walk away. Sheep, of course, aren't that cruel.

Flashback to the woman. "Can anyone come to your church? Can I come?"

And again, sometimes we don't know the love of God because we refuse to know it.

There are two common attitudes we hear quite frequently. One is the attitude expressed by a woman to Bruce McLeod once, "My husband and I are not ready to make up our minds about religion. There's good in all of them, and we're not ready to decide.". Such indecision, tolerant of all religions but committed

none, misses the essential element in experiencing the love of God in the real way. Limp conviction too often subsides into indifference and artificial anesthesia. Commitment is the way to experience the love of God.

The second attitude expresses a desire to know the answers to the great questions of life before committing oneself to God. However, to expect to have all the answers before you can have significant faith means that you will not have faith in your lifetime. The advice of St. Augustine is instructive, "Understanding is the reward of faith. Therefore, seek not to understand that you may believe, but believe that you may understand."

But how do we believe?

The great scholar and atheist Thomas Huxley was a guest at a friend's house for a party. He and most of the guests stayed overnight. The next morning, Sunday, all the guests except Huxley were going to church. Instead, Huxley approached one of the churchgoers and asked him, "Don't go to church. Stay home and tell me about your faith." "Oh no," said the man. "I am not a great scholar like you are. You would make what I say look foolish." Huxley replied, "I don't want you to argue your faith, to rationalize it or explain it. Just tell me what your faith means to you." The man took up that challenge. He stayed behind, and when he had finished, Thomas Huxley had tears in his eyes. "I wish I had a faith like that."

We can. We can by doing exactly what Huxley implied. Not by understanding or debating, but simply by being faithful. We can through conversion. To be converted literally means to go with. To go with whom? To go with God. To experience love doesn't mean we understand that love, but simply that we be open to receiving it. Alcoholics Anonymous has a saying, "Fake it to make it." If you believe that you no longer believe, fake it. Risk believing against belief and you will discover that the One you seek has already sought you, that the One you are looking for has already found you, that the One you have turned to go with has been with you all along, the One whose love you desire

has never stopped loving you. The hunger, the thirst for the love of God, even the question Does God love me? were planted by God. Be grasped by the love of God. And there shall be such joy in heaven that it will overflow your heart, this Church and all the world.

Does God love me? Yes, God loves you. Amen.