

Head of Christiana Presbyterian Church
Rev. Bob Undercuffler

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Newark, Delaware

The First Sunday in Lent

Psalm 25:1–10
Mark 1:9–15

“How About Love?”

Some years ago, during a memorial service for a young woman—wife, mother, who was doing well in all things—several of her friends came forward, and told of memories of her life. They told how she loved life, loved her husband and children and her job.

They said she loved her garden and her friends and her church. One friend, however, took a completely different approach. She came to the lectern and said:

Five hundred and twenty five thousand six hundred minutes,
moments so dear. (and then she began to sing)

Five hundred and twenty five thousand six hundred minutes,
how do you measure, measure a year?
How about love?
How do you measure the life of a woman or a man?
How about love?

That sounds familiar. It's from *Rent*, the Broadway musical and then motion picture. *Rent* features a group of young adults, living on the Lower East Side of Manhattan, each struggling to make it, to survive as musicians, dancers, social activists. They're struggling to find out what life is all about and to pay the rent.

Some attend an HIV/AIDS support group. Sitting in a circle in an otherwise empty community center gym, reflecting on the future and what it will hold for them, one young man quietly asks, “Will I lose my dignity? Will someone care?”

It's a courageous and touching story. People living with a fairly high degree of alienation—from families, from society, hanging on to one another for support, friendship, encouragement, love. They are family. On occasion they even become something like

church for one another. They ask, for themselves and for all of us, “Will someone care?” And they sing, “How do you measure a life? **How about love?**”

And so we have begun the Lenten season, the somber weeks before Holy Week— and then Easter -- Glad resurrection.

It is a time when we remember the awesome story of Jesus and his love.

And we turn inward and reflect and examine ourselves.

Lent began for 25 or so of us here at Head of Christiana last Wednesday with the imposition of ashes, a liturgical reminder of our mortality ... “We are dust and to dust we shall return.” Traditionally Lent has been a time for penitence, confession, repentance.

And this morning I encourage that we continue this journey, this season of Lent, but in a slightly different manner, by pondering the gift of love—God’s love, and the way God’s love awakens love in human hearts. In our hearts...and others.

How about love?

This is not just encouragement I offer. It’s encouragement offered by the psalmist. Whoever is speaking in Psalm 25, which we heard read this morning, knows what it means to be estranged and alone:

**“O my God, in you I trust;
do not let me be put to shame;
do not let my enemies exult over me.”**

Whoever is speaking here knows what it feels like to fail, to be fired, bullied, rejected, dumped-on, cut off.

Whoever is speaking here is not particularly proud of something that cannot be forgotten and that the writer fears may have somehow forever damaged his standing with God.

“Do not remember the sins of my youth or my transgressions,” she prays.

The positive thing about this writer, however, is that someone has told her a secret: God's anger doesn't last forever. Actually, the basic character of God is not all what we commonly imagine—God is not a remote judge who evaluates our character and behavior and doles out appropriate punishment or occasional blessing. No, the fundamental character of God is “steadfast love.”

“According to your steadfast love remember me,” the psalmist writes. “All the paths of the Lord are steadfast love and faithfulness.”

The Hebrew word, *chesed*, is translated “steadfast love.” It occurs no fewer than 180 times in the Bible, always about God. It means mercy, kindness, compassion. It comes from the Hebrew word for womb. It is like a mother's unconditional, unrelenting, indestructible love for her child. It is a love that will never give up. It's a love that gives birth.

And a love that will follow and pursue and understand and forgive and reclaim a lost child no matter where the child goes, no matter what the child has done.

In the face of this awesome love, everything is different. Seen in a more hope filled perspective.

So, If there is guilt, now it's not because a rule has been broken but because God has been disappointed for God's steadfast love has been betrayed.

If there is confession and repentance, it's because God's steadfast love invites us to be confident about God's forgiveness and loving embrace.

If there is alienation and isolation and our life feels desert-dry, there is an announcement—that we are not alone, that even if everyone else in the world has abandoned us and given up on us, God has not. God will not.

It is the very best news. The steadfast love of God.

That is what so many so desperately crave to hear today—what the people of Newark and Cecil County need to hear ... what we best let reverberate through our lives and project through our neighborhoods. Specifically, that at the heart of Christ's way, at

the center of our faith is an idea so unique, so stunning, that for centuries most people have not been able to believe it:

Hear this: at the heart of God is not anger, judgment, punishment, **but rather steadfast love.**

But further, “How about love?,” is not some sentimental valentine pasted on a white doily, but an affirmation of the most astonishing idea, precisely that love is the ancient creative power that moves the universe, the love that moves the sun and stars. Love that spans borders, abolishes walls, heals broken hearts, and creates glorious harmonies.

That central concept of our faith, is underlined by love’s absence in the increasingly violent and ugly world of religion and politics. People are genuinely afraid of religious intolerance that assails us in these days. People are increasingly fearful of religion that insists that it has truth, the only truth, and that therefore those who do not agree are enemies of truth and enemies of God.

People are genuinely afraid of religious intolerance and for good reason. Bombed mosques, churches and synagogues and untold numbers of revenge killings, and tortures too gruesome to imagine are a reminder of the potential for evil inherent in any religion that tolerates no difference, no diversity, no doubts or questions.

The movie Selma opens with four little girls walking down the steps of their Birmingham, Alabama church to their Sunday school class – they’re talking innocently, sweetly about their hair ... and the stairwell is rocked by a terrible explosion. Actually, that movie bombing was preceded by a real bombing, and bombings and shootings and lynchings that have happened since.

No, Islam does not have a monopoly on violent fundamentalism.

How about love?

This is no sentimental valentine. This is not to say that it doesn’t matter how we live because God loves us anyhow. This is not a moral relativism that results from concluding that God doesn’t care what we do or do not do. **Quite the opposite.** This **is** to say that God loves so unconditionally and passionately that nothing

we do can stop God from loving. Nothing we can say or do will cause God to give up on us. There is nowhere we can go that God will not pursue us, relentlessly. When we stray, when we disobey, when we rebel, when we simply ignore God and God's will, God doesn't get angry so much as grieves, just like a mother or father is heartbroken and weeps when a child strays from home. But God does not and will not give up, will not stop loving us, will not stop trying to bring us home.

Here's the way I see it. The people who heard Jesus' disciples proclaiming Good News were captivated as much by what they saw as by the words they heard. Jesus' followers had been transformed, changed. They were new people.

And it was love that did it, God's love was precisely what the first followers of Jesus did feel/did know. They had experienced Jesus' love and became convinced that Jesus was God in the flesh. "These followers of Jesus who have turned our world upside down have come here also," they affirmed. Once that love reached them it could not be stopped.

And the love planted by God in every human life is released and activated and called out by love's gracious targeting. What a fascinating thought. What a life-changing, world-changing idea!

A loving person is not produced by exhortations, rules, or threats. Love takes root in children ...in youth...adults only when love comes to them. As love washes over them. And we are among those who carry that love.

That's why Baptism, and especially the baptism of children, is such a perfect object lesson. "Little child, we say, "you understand nothing of what we are doing here today, but this is the way we make clear that God loves us, before we ever thought about loving God."

How about love?

Yes, Lent begins somberly, solemnly. Lent begins with Jesus in the desert, dry, hungry, alone, maybe full of doubt and misgivings about his own life and his prospects; maybe full of uncertainty about what he's supposed to do next; maybe tired of the desert routine of his life, maybe feeling alienated from his

family; maybe feeling distant from and impatient and alienated from God even.

But angels come and minister to Jesus, and he discovers that there is nowhere he can go, even the driest, loneliest desert, that God's steadfast love cannot find him, and embrace him and hold him and then call out of him his own unconditional love, his own love that will take him to the crisis of Good Friday and his cross and death—still loving, loving to the last, still willing to live his life, every minute of it, right up to the last minute, loving his friends, loving you and me, the whole wide world, answering God's steadfast, faithful love.

How can you measure a life?

How about love?

Amen.