



Love God – Luke 10:25-28; Genesis 1:26a, 27; 5:1b

Love God. Love is an abstract concept. “God” is, too, for most people. No wonder the scholar adds “all your mind” to the list of ways we must love God: good Presbyterian/rabbinical *intellectualism!*

Abstracts like love, for most people, need analogies or illustrations or stories to give them real meaning – for example, to talk about glory, I’d refer to a sunset or sunrise; for power, the ocean, a storm, or a storm on the ocean!

Love. Love is tough, even without bringing in God; you may love ice cream, a spouse, a friend: they have substance, you can see and touch them. Others know what you’re talking about. They probably share the same feeling. But love AND God? God is so hard to describe without using even more abstract concepts! Even Jesus uses parables, stories, to tell us what God is *like*. Unless we find some common ground, an experience we can understand, “love God just stays “out there,” or stuck in our heads.

So, today I want to give you two examples to consider – there we go, thinking again! – to see if we can understand this greatest commandment.

One is my Dad. No, God's not my Dad, nor was my Dad God, but stay with me here, especially those of you who had difficult or no relationship with a dad.

My Dad was big – just four inches shorter than me, and when I was a kid, about 220-240 pounds of solid muscle. His arms were bigger than my legs; his hands huge. He picked me up with one hand once when he was almost seventy years old, just for a joke. He was silent: was very frugal with his words. And, as all the men in my family do, he had a temper: white hot, truly fearsome, but by the time I came around (I once figured out that when I was born, he was almost exactly the same age I was when Sadie and Seth came into our lives), he had learned to control it very well.

On reflection, he showed his love for me twice. Once, he wrote me a letter while I was in the Navy; probably one of the few he ever wrote anyone except my mother when he was away during WWII: “Dear Larry; I hope this letter finds you well...”

And the second time he showed his love for me was this: We had two small houses – we called them “camps” – that we rented out in the summer to tourists. I was six or eight, helping him get the Big Camp

ready one spring. He went to get some tools, and I was playing with the front door lock – and closed the door, with the only key inside. Stupid, witless, inquisitive prankster stuff.

Talk about fear! I was scared witless over what Dad might do to me – why, I don't know, since he never once hit me – and I ran into the house, yelling to my Mom not to tell Dad where I was, ran upstairs and hid under the guest bed.

Of course, Mom told Dad where I was, and I could hear those heavy footsteps on the stairs while they creaked in protest.

But he didn't yell at me. He just said, "Come on out." I did. I followed him downstairs, and once we were out the door, he took my hand in his huge paw and we walked over together to the Big Camp. We went around to the back, and he managed to just be able to get the back window open enough for skinny little me to squeeze through (old wooden sashes in a damp climate don't open easily!).

I walked over and unlocked the door, and that was it. He did not show his anger; he knew I'd done wrong. He knew I was scared and sorry, as much of both as could fit into my tiny body. He did not speak in anger, but with ultimate authority, and we never talked about the incident again.

How could you not love someone like that? Forgiving, showing and helping me to make right what I'd done wrong, and standing by me

the whole way. Power enough – strength enough – to beat the life out of me; heart enough – spirit enough – to plant seeds of love in me, and remorse for what I’d done.

Now, God’s a little like that: quiet and purposeful, using me to fix my own mistake like the way God forgives and leads and teaches us – wrath held in check – and gives us tools, guides us to make things right by his grace.

I know that dads are tough for many, but here, on reflection, I can see how God’s dealing with us is like my Dad’s with me, and that my Dad’s actions that day were out of love.

And God loves all of us, all the time. As Scripture tells us, “God is love.” We read that God is a God of justice, of righteousness, even of mercy: but God *is* love.

But this is Children’s Sabbath. So let’s try another way of looking at this and see if it helps us get a better picture yet.

Children. Infants, in fact: just born, sleeping. The Bible tells us about creation twice, in the first and second chapter of Genesis, but did you know that it also tells us about the creation of humans twice? In chapter 1, verses 26 and 27, and chapter 5, verse 1. Both times, though it tells us that “when God created humans, he created them male and female, in his own image he created them.”

What the Bible is saying is that in some mysterious, divine way, we humans, whatever we look like, whatever the color of our skin or wherever we're born, whatever the circumstances, bear the image of God, *imago dei*. Psychology tells us that humans are hard-wired, instinctively programmed to respond with gentleness, kindness, love – if you will – to big eyes, big heads, the way an infant looks. Our brains release chemicals that make us want to protect them. We even breed animals to look sort of like infants.

This is closer to abstract – very few can look at a sleeping newborn, *any* sleeping newborn, without feeling something inside, without the “awwww” factor. But the “image of God” is a fleeting thing. Humans are human, and never truly innocent, but we can love the image of God in them, and that's one reason it's so hard to see children suffer. Jesus said, “You must become like little children,” and little children may – just may – be as close to looking at God as we can get here in this world. You can also see God in the person sitting next to you, and in the faces you watch on the evening news.

Now, neither of these examples holds true if you push it too hard; God is so much more than either or both of these, obviously, but my Dad's almost abstract love for me and our own instinctive love for children will, I hope, make you think about how you can love God.

And it is this God, who is not only all around us, but in us and with us, that we are not invited to love, we are commanded to love. And that command now shouldn't be so hard to understand – because it's not so much a command, an obligation, as something that ought to rise up in us like an artesian well.

Some of you, I know, have reached that spiritual peak where the abstract of love meets the infinite of God; but for the rest of us, this is God's single most important commandment. Jesus himself, God's son, says so.

So, what I want you to do is take some time today, alone, to think about these two examples, and try to come up with examples of your own, your own way to describe love and God and loving God. Put it into words as best you can. Pray over it. And work to make it real, not just an abstract. Please: for the love of God.