

Sermon March 15, 2015 “Fences, Burdens and God’s Love” John 3:1-21 Ephesians 2:1-10

It is tradition in many churches to take a break on the fourth Sunday in Lent, a break from the tedious introspective aspects of Lent, from the dark side of the soul, to consider God’s unconditional and un-condemning love. Mid-Lent is a time to pause and realize that we have come to this place not because of what we have done or left undone, but because of what God has done. Today, we remember that “God so loved the world.”

Years ago, when our family went to Germany to visit some friends, we spent one very difficult night in Frankfurt. We had left our friends’ care and taken the train into the city so as to be able to get to the airport the next morning. Before we had left the home of our friends, they had called to make sure that accommodations would be available in Frankfurt, and were assured that all the American visitors needed to do was go to the “Information” booth at the train station and we would have no trouble.

It didn’t work out that way. We arrived at the Information desk and were informed that there was NOTHING available in Frankfurt at all, because of two or three large conventions in the city at that time. We were horrified, but just as we were wondering if we could go to the airport and spend the night there in the waiting area, the man came up with one possible accommodation for us. It was not terribly far from the train station, and it would cost us over \$200/night. We took it.

Well, it turned out to be something AAA would never have listed. We were on the eighth floor of a dismal building, and the elevator went only to the sixth floor. The place was dark and filthy, and the room was like an afterthought. It was a very close room, in a very seedy establishment; surely the thing was available only because nobody else would take it.

I didn’t feel safe that night. I worried about our kids, who were only 11 and 7 at the time. I worried about fire. I worried about being robbed. I worried about creatures, too, for there were several fairly large openings in the wall that freaked me out.

Obviously, our family survived the night, caught the plane and made it back home to the USA. But the experience will always stay with me, that basic sense of not being secure, of being at risk. I realize that for many persons, this is their way of life, feeling “at risk,” unknown or unloved, unsure whether things will fall apart on them at any given time.

In the Gospel of John, we are told, “For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish, but have everlasting life.” (3:16) This means that even in a scary dump in Frankfurt, God holds us in love; that even when our cancer is spreading and threatening the life we know, God holds us in love. Even when our marriages fail or our jobs evaporate or we are suffocated by overdue bills, God holds us in love that will not fail us.

It’s not such an easy task, to trust this love that we are offered. Anxiety is a way of life for many folks in our society. Even if our life situations are not so bad, we too often find

ourselves “worrying about tomorrow,” worrying about things that could perhaps someday happen, and having the joy pretty much drained out of our lives.

Retired Methodist preacher Thomas Lane Butts once gave a sermon entitled, “Climbing Invisible Fences” in which he spoke about anxiety. In the sermon, Butts referenced John Steinbeck’s novel, *Grapes of Wrath*, which includes a scene where Jim Casy, a former preacher and troubled person who is traveling toward California with the Joad family, reacts to their car trouble with certainty that their entire trip is jinxed. Mr. Joad resists Jim’s pessimism, saying, “I climb fences when I got fences to climb.” Casy shakes his head and says, “It’s the bes’ way, I gotta agree. But there’s different kinda fences. There’s folks like me that climbs fences that ain’t even strang up yet -- and can’t help it.” (P. 237, Viking Press, 1966)

Too often we who are Christian lose sight of what we have been offered, and instead go through our lives full of fear and anxiety, worrying about what might happen, as though life is just a field full of land mines and we are terrified as to what may blow up in our faces. I personally am very good at stringing fences!!

Jesus told folks not to be anxious for tomorrow... God knows what you need... Can anyone add one little measure to his life by worrying about it? (Matthew 6:25-34)

But can we believe that God really loves us enough to take care of our needs?

Rev. Butts told of a time when he was trying to move a three hundred pound filing cabinet across his office. He couldn’t move it, so he asked his son for help. Together, they still could not budge the thing, so his son suggested that they remove each of the drawers, move the empty frame, and then replace the drawers one at a time. In this creative way, the filing cabinet was easily moved.

I quote Rev Butts:

“An overpowering burden of anxiety can be handled creatively if we will learn how to do it. Break it up into manageable units. Jesus did not promise us a life free from anxiety, worry, and burdens, but he has offered us a way of handling the inevitable anxieties of life. As Jesus put it: ‘Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me...’ (Matt. 11:29-30) Jesus speaks of faith as the only effective antidote for fear and anxiety. Faith is not a commodity available to the casual religious person who treats God like a cosmic errand boy. We build a reservoir of faith by constant practice. We must believe and fail and succeed until trusting God becomes a natural response in all circumstances. When we accept Jesus Christ as Lord of all of life and not just a pilot for inclement weather, our faith will then enable us to live with anxiety in a creative manner.” (from “Climbing Invisible Fences,” *Tigers in the Dark*, pp. 44-46)

How much does God love us? “But God, who is rich in mercy, out of the great love with which he loved us even when we were dead through our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ... by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God...” (Ephesians 2:4-8, portions)

We're in tax season right now. If you earned money in 2014 and have not yet prepared your tax return, you surely face that challenge in the next few weeks. Tax time makes us see that even our blessings cost us something: the more money you made last year, the more money the Internal Revenue Service wants you to pay them. Blessing has a price by our world's standards. Tax-time makes us count the money we've made, the deductions we may be able to take, and it sort of forces us to evaluate our financial situations. Perhaps Lent is not so different: we evaluate our walk as Christians, where we have built up and where we have lost ground, the benefits, the costs.

But there's one big difference! By God's standards, blessing is given for nothing. We did not earn God's love, we do not pay taxes on God's blessings. We are simply asked to love others in return. We are asked to trust this God who has given us so much. Part of what God gives us is the assurance that God's love for us will never fail, no matter what is happening to us in life, and the promise that we need not deal with the problems and burdens of our life alone.

Years ago a man named Andrew Davison wrote a letter to his colleagues at Colgate Rochester Seminary about his experiences with Dr. Albert Schweitzer. Davison's words: "Dr. Schweitzer was eighty-five years old when I visited his jungle hospital at Lambarene, on the banks of the Ogowe River. You can imagine the deep and profound effect of that three-day visit, which included opportunity for some leisurely conversation with that great humanitarian, theologian, musician, and physician. But one event stands out in a special way.

"It was about eleven in the morning. The equatorial sun was beating down mercilessly, and we were walking up a hill with Dr. Schweitzer. Suddenly he left us and strode across the slope of the hill to a place where an African woman was struggling upward with a huge armload of wood for the cookfires. I watched with both admiration and concern as the 85 year old man took the entire load of wood and carried it up the hill for the relieved woman. When we all reached the top of the hill, one of the members of our group asked Dr. Schweitzer why he did things like that, implying that in the heat and at his age he should not. Albert Schweitzer, looking right at all of us and pointing to the woman, said simply, "No one should ever have to carry a burden like that alone." (pause)

We talk about God's love, as poured out for us in "life-form" through Jesus. Remember this: you do not have to bear any of your burdens alone; and you needn't go through life feeling as fearful and uncertain as I did that night in the dumpy hotel in Germany. You don't need to hold yourself back from really living because of fear of some fence or land mine that probably won't even be there. You are not a stranger in a foreign land, ever, *wherever* you are. You are loved by God, the God who made you and who made you with a purpose for your life.

May the love about which we speak fill our hearts and erase the hold our anxieties can have over us. May we become free to experience the undeserved, non-taxable riches of God's love in our lives as we more and more commit ourselves to love, trust and serve him. Amen.