

Tough love

Isaiah 50:1-3

November 26, 2006

I love my children ... Matthew, Henry, and Louisa.

I have not been a perfect father. I have made my share of mistakes, said things I shouldn't have said, haven't said things I should have said. But, at the same time, I have also done a lot of things right. I have said the right thing when it needed to be said, done the right thing when it needed to be done, pointed in the right direction. But the best thing I have done for my children is this: I have never stopped loving them and never will stop loving them, each one of them.

Because I love my children, I fed them and clothed them and cared for them when they were ill. I attended their soccer games and football games and basketball games and volleyball games, their talent shows and their chorus concerts. Because I love them, I bought them gifts and bought them cars and paid for their schooling. I took them fishing and took them to concerts, to Supersonics basketball games and to Women's World Cup soccer games.

Because I love my children, I expected them to follow our family rules. When they were in high school, they had to be home by midnight even on weekends, even if they were the only kids that had to be home so early! When they went to a party, we called ahead to check in with the parents, and we enforced the rule that they could not have friends over or go to a friend's house if no parents were home, even though we were the only family that did that! On school nights, we set strict limits on TV time and computer time and telephone time, even though we were the only family that would even think of doing such an unreasonable thing!

Because I love my children, I allowed them to suffer the consequences of their mistakes and gave them consequences myself for a serious breach of the family rules. That's right: *You're grounded!* Some of our greatest frustrations as parents came when teachers or coaches or administrators would not follow through with appropriate consequences for our children's poor choices and we were left as the only ones holding them accountable ... because we loved them.

Because I love my children, I let one of them go. Many of you know that our eldest son left home at the age of seventeen and a half. He left and we let him go. There was a long and complicated history that led to that day, both before he was adopted by us and once he became a member of our household, but that day we let him go. We let him deal with the consequences of his choice to do it his own way. He did suffer consequences. He had a hard road. But today we share a renewed relationship, a deeper love, that I do not believe would have been possible if we had not let him go.

So you see, love is a very complex thing. But you know that! Sometimes love is providing, sometimes love is withholding. Sometimes love is holding tight, sometimes love is letting go. Sometimes love is being gentle, sometimes love is being tough.

Genuine love is always very complex, because life is complex. Genuine love gets involved, takes risks, dares to keep going, dares to keep trying, even when things do get tough, even when love itself may be interpreted as unlove.

But if this is what genuine love is like among us, why should God's love for us be any different? It isn't. Think about it ... What does God's love for us look like? How do you know that you are loved by God?

Do you know you are loved by God because you are blessed? Because you have a job and a home and a family? Because you enjoy good health, because you are safe, because you are free? Because you are accepted, because you are forgiven, because you are given the promise of eternal life?

Yes. All these blessings and countless more are signs of God's love for us, but God's love is about more than blessing, about more than providing what we want and need. God's love is about guiding and molding and encouraging and challenging, giving us the direction and giving us the tools that will allow us to grow up into the image of God we are made to bear.

God's law is a sign of God's love for us: do not kill, do not steal, do not accuse another falsely, do not covet; care for the widow and the orphan and the stranger among you; love the Lord your God above everything else, with all your heart and soul and mind and strength, and love your neighbor as you love yourself; love your enemy, forgive those who sin against you, do not take revenge.

And sometimes, God loves us by letting us go, by letting us suffer the consequences of our poor choices.

*Do you think I sent my people away
like a man who divorces his wife?
Do you think I sold you into captivity
like a man who sells his children as slaves?
No, you went away captive because of your sins;
you were sent away because of your crimes.*

Sometimes what may look to us like abandonment -- the Jewish exiles did indeed accuse God of abandoning them -- is really just tough love, tough love from the God who says, *I will never forget you!*

When we suffer, when we see other people suffer, we often interpret the suffering as a sign of God's rejection, or as a sign of God's absence, or as a sign of God's impotence, God's inability to turn things around and make things right. I have been thinking especially of the horrendous suffering of the Iraqi people, suffering that tears at my mind and heart, even when I am so safe, so far removed from it. I imagine myself there, in their place ... It is so awful even to consider!

So where is God? Has God abandoned the people of Iraq? Does God not love the people of Iraq? Why doesn't God put a stop to the violence?

Why don't we? Are we prepared -- Sunnis and Shiites and Americans and British -- to acknowledge each our own responsibility for the suffering of the people of Iraq? Are we prepared to listen and respond to the voice of God who calls us to a different way?

*Why did my people fail to respond
when I went to them to save them?
Why did they not answer when I called?*

Genuine love is complex, so complex, and the problem of human suffering is so complex, so much more complex than this one sermon can address. But I want you to consider this: sometimes we pose the problem too simplistically. We look at the reality of human suffering and we say that if there is a God, then either God does not love us or God cannot do anything about it.

But neither life nor love are that simple. Is it not possible that God could do something, but lets us go, lets us choose and lets us do, out of love? Is it not possible that we need to grow up, grow up in our thinking about God and God's love, and grow up in taking responsibility for ourselves? Is it not possible that the love of God seeks to teach us how to love, as individual people and as a human race, instead of taking the control away from us?

Will we listen? Will we answer when God calls? Will we permit the tough and graceful and unrelenting love of God to do its work among us, transforming our thinking, healing our broken souls, redirecting our wills, calling our bodies to be put to good use? Will we show that we are true children, the grown-up children, of the One whose love never ends?