

Love in a Nutshell

(Preached by Cheryl Williams at Footscray Baptist Church March 10th, 2024 – John 3:14-21)

‘For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life. This would have to be the most well-known verse in the bible, I reckon it was the verse most of us learnt first.

Martin Luther said it summed up the gospel in a nutshell. Many of John’s verses sum up the entire gospel in a verse of two.

Today I want to explore with you how it does just that.

When I think of love I am immediately drawn to two children’s stories. First, the Velveteen Rabbit. It is a story about a little boy who receives for Christmas a velveteen rabbit. Initially the boy doesn’t take much notice of the rabbit, so the rabbit ends up in the toy box with all the other toys. Here, an older toy, the Skin Horse offers the rabbit some words of wisdom. Skin Horse tells the rabbit what it is like to be real. “When a child loves you for a really long time and plays with you and wears you out, then you become Real.” The Velveteen Rabbit, would like that one day. One night the boy’s nanny gives him the rabbit to sleep with and they become friends. After a time of loving the rabbit, the boy tells his nanny that the rabbit is Real. One day outside playing with the boy, some wild rabbits appear, but they soon run away when they realise the Velveteen Rabbit isn’t like them. When the boy gets sick with scarlet fever, the Velveteen Rabbit is with him through his recovery, until, the day the boy is about to go to the seaside to continue to recuperate. It is decided that the rabbit needed to be burned as it was full of germs. In the midst of his sadness a fairy appears and tells the rabbit he was already real to the little boy and she could make him real to everyone. With her help, he is soon hopping around with the wild rabbits. Later the boy is out playing in the woods and spots some wild rabbits, one of them, however, looks very familiar – Velveteen Rabbit had come back to find his friend who had helped him become Real.¹ The story teaches us that love makes us real.

The second story that I think of is ‘Guess How Much I Love You’ which I have read to you many times. It is the story of a baby hare and ‘Daddy’ hare who are settling in for the night, each telling the other just how much they love each other. Of course, the line most of us will remember is when the older hare says ‘I love you to the moon and back’. In effect true love is immeasurable.

But back to the text, which I like Martin Luther, think sums up the entire gospel in a nutshell, it is the story of God’s love in a nutshell.

1. For God – in the beginning is God.
2. So loved – God’s very essence, very being is love, it is God’s identity and action. A love that keeps us on loving, through the good and the bad, such love is almost foolish. This love we know will also be an act of self-sacrifice.
3. The world – the object of that love is the world, both humans and creatures and plants, everything is the object of God’s love, no favourites, no exclusions.

¹ <https://www.shmoop.com/study-guides/literature/velveteen-rabbit/summary>

4. That he gave/sent – God gives, he gifts us, he is generous and can't help but give of Godself. God gives freely, it is God's choice, no need to earn the gift.
5. His only son – that gift is of course Jesus, God's only Son. Jesus, is God's true representation of Godself. It is where the divine and human meet, as such it is an act of solidarity, a giving of God's very self, an act of solidarity with us.
6. That all who believe – this reminds us that we need to respond, we can't earn God's favour, but we must make a choice, a choice to accept and trust God's great love for us.
7. Might have eternal life – for the writer of this gospel, John, eternal life is not about some kind of future life in some unknown place, no for John, eternal life is in the here and now and it refers to the fullness of life or abundant life, an image he uses elsewhere in his gospel. This is the true life, the life for which we were made.

So, there it is, the gospel in a nutshell, God's love in a nutshell. God's love whether we like it or not. A love that makes us real, a love that is immeasurable, that goes to the moon and back. Unconditional love, a love that will not let us go no matter what we do.

If we were to continue on with the passage, we would be reminded that Jesus comes into the world not to condemn it but to save it. God's act in Jesus toward creation is fundamentally positive and not negative or seeking to punish, God wants life for all the world.

Our Ephesians reading echoes the same message as Paul reminds us that God is rich in mercy, and out of his great love for us makes us fully alive in Jesus. We are saved by God's grace and it is a gift of God.

So, I guess that if we are showered with such love, we can do nothing but respond with love, such love will lead us to sharing it with others, showing exactly the same kind of love to all that God has for the world.

I am not going to pretend that loving like God is easy, we all now it is not, but perhaps it should be our goal.

I think Michael Leunig sums it up best in his poem:

There are only two feelings.
Love and fear.
There are only two languages.
Love and fear.
There are only two activities.
Love and fear.
There are only two motives, two procedures, two frameworks, two results.
Love and fear.
Love and fear.

And elsewhere he says: Love one another and you will be happy.

It's as simple and as difficult as that.

As you move through Lent, remember God so loved the world that He gave His only Son, God loves us to the moon and back. Amen.