

Sermon: Yearning for Love

Series: Yearning for God – Advent 2011

Scriptures: Psalm 80:1-7, 17-19 and John 4:1-15

Date Used: December 18, 2022

Focus: There are people who are yearning to be loved and accepted as they are, to feel as though they belong to a family or community. Jesus, and his church, meet this yearning for love.

In the late 1950's, Lionel Bart took the Charles Dickens story of Oliver Twist, and made it into the musical, Oliver. The story is about a young, orphaned boy, Oliver, who following his mother's death during childbirth, is raised in a workhouse in 19th century London, England. The boys that work there are half-starved and are fed only gruel by the cruel manager of the workhouse, Mr. Bumble.

Early in the play, when nine-year old Oliver asks for more food, Mr. Bumble becomes quite enraged and tells the boy to gather his belongings. A short time later Oliver is taken out into the streets of London and sold. He is purchased by an undertaker, Mr. Sowerberry. Oliver is taken into his home and is forced to sleep in the basement of the funeral parlor where the coffins are kept.

In the musical, as Oliver sits in the dark basement he begins to sing:

Where is love?

Does it fall from skies above?

*Is it underneath the willow tree
that I've been dreaming of?*

Where is she

who I close my eyes to see?

*Will I ever know the sweet "hello"
that's only meant for me?*

Who can say where she may hide?

Must I travel far and wide

*'til I am beside the someone who
I can mean something to?*

Where?

Where is love?

The unwanted orphan's words reflect a heart-felt yearning to belong. They reflect his deep desire to have someone in his life that he can mean something to, a relationship where he is wanted and loved.

Oliver's longing to be loved does not merely reflect a desire for his life, but it is something all of us innately desire. We want to be loved. We need to be loved. We need to be wanted. We need to belong to at least one other person, somewhere.

Early on in our married life Suzanne worked as the social worker for the Public Health Department in Mansfield. In her work she would meet with teenage girls and women who came to the pre-natal and early childhood clinics. On occasion, when she would be meeting with a teenage girl or a young woman during a pre-natal visit, the expectant mother would say, "I wanted to have a baby so that I could have someone in my life that wanted me and loved me." What a sad reality.

The Samaritan woman that Jesus encounters at Jacob's well seems to fit into the category of someone that is longing to be loved, someone who wants to belong.

In ancient Samaria, the women of the community used to go to the well to get water in the morning so they could socialize as they did this daily chore and avoid the heat of the day. It is interesting that the woman that Jesus encounters is at the well by herself in the heat of the day. We generally conclude that she was rejected by the people of her community. As Jesus speaks to her, the audience is informed as to why she is alone at the well. She has been married five times, and at the time she encounters Jesus, she is living with a man she is not married to. She was hardly the kind of person many people wanted to associate with or be associated with.

At some point during his conversation with the woman, Jesus reveals his true identity as the Messiah to her. Upon hearing this news, she felt compelled to run back to her village and tell the people there all that Jesus had said and done. When the people of the village checked out her story for themselves and found it to be true, they ask Jesus to stay with them. He remains in Sychar two more days.

Though his words do not convey it, Jesus' actions do. He seeks to meet this woman's need for love. He seeks to help her realize that she belongs. The very idea that Jesus speaks to the Samaritan woman would have been startling to the audience who heard this story. That was something men generally did not do in public. And when you consider that Jesus knew this woman's history, he knew her background, his actions are even more surprising.

By giving the Samaritan woman a reason to announce his presence to the people of her community, Jesus is giving her an opportunity to connect with the hometown folks. The action of Jesus, of accepting this woman as she is and by making her part of his community, his action gives the people of Sychar permission to do the same thing. As the story develops, we see the people of Sychar begin to accept her and to reinstate her to a place in the community.

I would love to have known what happened to that Samaritan woman. Was her life changed by the love she experienced in Christ? Did the love that Christ revealed to her on this one occasion, help her get in touch with God's love for her? You wonder, did her re-connection with the community last? Was she able to join with the other women of the community as they made their morning trip to Jacob's well to gather water? Or did things go back to how they used to be? Did she become an outcast once again?

We long to be loved.

We need to belong.

This marvelous story reveals that God, through Christ, wants to meet our need for belonging and to be loved. And this gospel which was written for the church reveals that God wants the church to be a community that meets people's need for love. The church needs to be the place where people feel they are loved and are invited to belong.

Rebecca Pippert shares the story of a man named Jacob that she met in Israel.

Jacob was an eastern European Jew. He had married a Gentile woman and they had a son. World War II came along and with it came the deportation of Jews. But Jacob's identity was not widely known, and since he was married to a Gentile, he thought he might be protected from going to a prison camp.

But one day as he returned home from work the Gestapo was waiting for him. When they saw him, they arrested him. As he was being led away, he saw his wife and he cried out to the soldiers that he had not been allowed to say good-bye to his wife before he was taken.

The soldiers laughed at him and said, "You fool. Don't you know it was your wife who tipped us off?" Jacob accused them of lying. But the soldiers replied, "You must be the only guy who doesn't know your wife has been having an affair with the chief of police." Jacob looked at his wife in disbelief, but he could tell by the expression of guilt on her face that the accusation was true.

He spent the next five years in a prison camp. Several times he nearly died. There were times he hoped he would. The bitterness and despair that filled him were the only reminders to him that he was still alive. The one thing that gave him any reason to live at all was the hope of being reunited with his son.

The war finally came to an end and Jacob was released. The one thing that gave him the strength he needed to get home was the thought of seeing his son. When he got back to his village, he was told that his wife had taken their son and moved to an unknown destination in northern Europe.

In that moment Jacob knew he would never see his son again. His last hope was gone. He was alone. He had no one. He had no one to belong to, he had nowhere to belong. He was physically ill, desperately hungry, and penniless. So, he took up residency in a park where the homeless people of the community resided.

Before long the police arrested him for loitering. In speaking with Jacob, they realized he was a man in desperate straits. When they asked Jacob if he had any family at all. Jacob told them he believed he had a brother that lived in Tel Aviv. So, the government sent him there, with the hope that he would be able to find his brother.

Jacob arrived in Israel with no money. He had hardly eaten in a week, and he was quite ill. He found his brother's house and went to the door. But his brother would not let him in. He was convinced that this stranger at his door could not be his brother Jacob. Jacob's brother told him to come back with papers to prove that he was who he said he was.

Jacob did not give him the chance to find out. He couldn't suffer the indignity of one more rejection.

He wandered into a park where it seemed that other people like him gathered. He was hungry and he was sick. And he began to think about death. He knew with the shape he was in it would only be a matter of days.

Several days passed and as he was reclining on a park bench, in the distance he saw a blond-haired teenage girl, obviously an American, enter the park with a friend. He closed his eyes. Then Jacob heard someone with a soft voice speaking to him. He opened his eyes, and the blond-haired girl was standing over him. It was her compassion that caught him off guard. It was the first time he had heard anyone speak to him with such kindness in six years. But instead of accepting her kindness he growled at her, "What do you want?"

She said, "Sir, I wasn't supposed to even be in this park, I got off the bus at the wrong place. But when I saw you, and the look on your face, I just couldn't leave without telling you something."

Again, he snapped at her, "Why don't you just get back on your bus and leave me alone!"

Again, in a soft tone she replied, "Sir, I was afraid to come over here, but I feel like God is nudging me to tell you something before I get back on the bus. I wish I knew how to say it better but, well, Jesus loves you. He really does."

Jacob looked at her in disbelief. This child was telling him that after all that he had been through, all the indignity he had suffered, all the rage that had filled his soul for so many years, that someone loved him. This little girl who had probably never known a day of suffering in her life, who had probably never felt unloved, was telling him some Gentile God loved him.

Jacob could not decide if he should be outraged by her audacity or moved that she made the effort to talk with him. But as he looked into her eyes, he could see that she was crying... and moved by her compassion, he began to weep as well.

Between sobs he said to the girl, "No one could love me, child. It's too late for me."

She then took his hand in hers and said, "No, it's not too late. God will gladly love you if you let him. Just tell God you want him to, and God will love you and help you."

Jacob said it was at that moment he knew Someone, God, was reaching out to him through her. He could not have envisioned a more unlikely messenger.

He prayed with the girl. Then he thanked she and her friend but told them to be on their way since he was sick and dying. But the young women refused to leave. Instead, they helped him to his feet and took him to the home where they were staying.

That family spent a year nursing Jacob back to health. During that year they shared their faith and prayed with him. But more than anything, Jacob found the love he so desperately needed and desired.

Jacob eventually found a job, found a place to live and reconnected with his brother.

When he spoke to Rebecca Pippet, the author of this story, twenty years after he met that blond-haired girl in the park he said, "It would have been so easy to have rejected that girl, to have chosen to harbor all the years of resentment and disillusionment in my heart.... But to think that God reached out to me, gave me a home and a family who loved me, restored my health, and above all else, filled my heart with a gladness and joy I never knew was possible!... So much has happened in my life since that moment twenty years ago. But the one fact that staggers me most of all is that the girl was right. Jesus loves me. He really does."

Our yearning for love, the world's yearning for love, our yearning to belong is met in and through Christ and through the community he provides for us in His church.