

"God's Gift To Us: Unconditional Love"

THIS MORNING I will begin by telling you a true story, in an abbreviated form.ⁱ A woman by the name of Catherine Moore was having a problem. Catherine's Dad was withdrawing more and more into a shell of bitterness about life. Catherine loved her Dad, but now, in his older years, it seemed that there was no way to reach him.

Dad's temperament had gone sour. He complained about almost everything--from the daily headlines, to his food, to all the flaws he perceived in other people. Catherine chauffeured her Dad all around town, but he repeatedly criticized her for her driving.

Dad repaid kindnesses with sarcasm and rejection, to the point where almost no one wanted to help him any more--not even Catherine.

DAD HAD BEEN a robust lumberjack in Washington and Oregon. He had long prided himself on his physical strength, and on all the lumberjack contests he had won. The shelves in his small home were filled with his gold and silver trophies.

But now things were different. Catherine's mother was gone. Dad lived by himself alone. And his health was failing. At age 67 he had a near fatal heart attack, which brought his log lifting days to an abrupt end. From that point on, Dad's life began to slip into darker and darker moods of bitterness.

Although he never spoke of it, Dad's bitterness was likely rooted in fears which were prompted by these life changes: His fear of growing old. His fear of being alone. His fear, that now he was worthless to everyone--even worthless to himself.

CATHERINE AND HER HUSBAND DICK, invited her father to come live with them on their farm. Catherine hoped that this change of environment would do her father well. But the result was disastrous. Dad's sour attitude, and his constant complaining, threw the whole house into an uproar.

Catherine was at her wits' end. She repeatedly prayed to God for a way to help her father. But no answer came.

One day, Catherine happened upon a magazine article, which gave her an idea. Catherine went to a local animal shelter. There she picked out an older dog--a Pointer--which gazed at her with soulful brown eyes from its cage.

According to the shelter worker, that dog just appeared, seemingly out of nowhere, at the shelter's front gate one day. The shelter workers took the dog in, as they felt someone would soon claim him. But no one

ever did. Now that animal was scheduled to be put down the next day.

Hearing that, and remembering those brown eyes, Catherine signed the necessary papers, and brought the dog home with her. In some ways that dog wasn't much to look at. His muzzle was streaked with gray age marks. And his hip bones jutted out in lopsided triangles.

Even so, Catherine was excited, and pleased with herself. After arriving home and honking her car horn for her father to come out, Catherine shouted, with great joy in her voice:

Ta Da! Look what I got you, Dad!

Dad shuffled out onto the front porch. He took one look at the animal at Catherine's side. Then he wrinkled up his face in disgust, and snarled:

If I had wanted a dog, I would have gotten one. And I would have picked out a better specimen than that bag of bones. Keep it! I don't want it!

At that, Catherine's face flushed red with anger. She shouted back,

You'd better get used to him, Dad. He's staying!

Dad turned away in scorn, ignoring his daughter's words. But then Catherine screamed at his back, *Did you hear me old man?*

Immediately Dad swung around. His eyes were ablaze with fury. His body shook, as he balled up his fists at his sides. For the longest moment, father and daughter just stood there, glaring at each other. The air between them was electric with tension.

SUDDENLY, THE POINTER BROKE FREE from Catherine's grip. He wobbled his way up onto the porch, where he plopped down in front of Dad. Then ever so slowly, and carefully, that dog raised his paw to Dad.

Dad's lower jaw began to tremble when he saw that uplifted paw. Anger gave way to confusion in Dad's eyes. The Pointer waited patiently. After a few minutes, Dad finally dropped to his knees, and began hugging that animal.

THAT DAY, Dad's life began to change once again. Dad named the dog, Cheyenne. Cheyenne and Catherine's Dad soon became inseparable. They took long walks together, down dusty lanes and asphalt streets, to explore their community together. They went fishing together at the creek. They even attended church together, with Cheyenne curling up at Dad's feet.

Cheyenne's love for Dad was unconditional. Those big brown eyes would look up at Dad, with such caring and seeming understanding. Over the

next three years, the special love of that pet, slowly melted Dad's bitterness and his deep inner fears. With Cheyenne always at his side, Dad really began to enjoy his life once again.

ONE NIGHT when the whole family was sleeping, Cheyenne did an unusual thing. He nosed his way into Catherine's bedroom. Concerned, Catherine got up. Going into her father's bedroom, she discovered that he had passed away in his sleep. Yet, as Catherine noticed, there was a serene smile on Dad's face.

Two days later, in the midst of her grief, Catherine went into her father's bedroom again. There she was shocked to find that Cheyenne had also died. His lifeless body was curled up on the rag rug, where he always slept--right beside Dad's bed.

At Dad's funeral, the minister spoke about Dad, and about this dog which which had changed Dad's life so dramatically--about this dog which seemingly appeared out of nowhere. Reflecting on that day at her father's funeral, Catherine later wrote these words:

For me, the past dropped into place, completing a puzzle that I had not seen before...Suddenly I understood. I knew that God had answered my prayers after all.

IN OUR SCRIPTURE READING this morning, there is a famous biblical saying. As the first epistle of John tells us: "perfect love casts out fear."

Just about everyone has heard that saying. But does everyone understand what it means? What is perfect love?

To my mind, the "perfect love" of which John spoke, is what we today often refer to as "unconditional love." In simple terms, it's a love which keeps on loving, without conditions.

It's a love which welcomes the prodigal back into the fellowship of the family circle--no matter what the prodigal has done.

As the Apostle Paul said in his letters to the Corinthians, it is a love which is patient and kind. It is a love which does not insist on its own way. It is a love which bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.

It is a solid, forever kind of love, which--as the famous hymn says--
"wilt not let me go."

THE SAD FACT OF THE MATTER is that our world is filled with conditional loves. All too often people care for each other, on a "tit-for-tat" basis. Their relationships are contractual. For example:

--If you are kind to me, then I will be kind to you.

--If you live up to my expectations, then I will reward you with my caring.

Such “contractual” loves are far different than the free and gracious, outflowing kind of love which simply says, “my love for you is unending--no matter what! I may not approve of everything you do.

I may deeply wish you would do things differently, but even so, my love for you is always there. You can depend on it!

OUR WORLD IS FULL of conditional loves. And for that reason, many people assume that God’s love must also be conditional. But that is a great misunderstanding. It is a misunderstanding which Jesus, the Apostle Paul, Martin Luther, and so many other Christians have tried to combat, down through the centuries.

For God’s love really is unconditional. It is a free-flowing, life-affirming, hope-filled, agape kind of love which is offered to all. All we humans have to do, is open our hearts to receive God’s love.

Jesus himself once compared God’s love, to the life-nurturing, thirst-quenching power of the rain, which falls on everyone, both the righteous and the unrighteous. As Jesus said in his Sermon on the Mount:

But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of your Father in heaven; for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous. [Matthew 5:45]

The truth is that we humans don’t have to earn God’s love. We don’t even have to deserve God’s love. For that love is always there for us. It’s there for us as a gift from God, which is just waiting to be received, so that free-flowing love can transform our lives:

- So that love can bring more meaning and satisfaction into our lives.
- So that love can forgive our sins and curb our tendencies to sin.
- So that love can cast out our human fears and anxieties.

YES, JOHN’S EPISTLE is right. Unconditional love does cast out fear. Unconditional love takes the “edge” off our fears, as we realize that each of us truly is loved, truly is accepted, and truly is cared for--even with all our human shortcomings.

Unconditional love can work miracles. For that kind of forever love, touches something very deep within the human spirit. It touches our hearts, in ways that can renew our joy in living, and our trust that God will provide for us eternally, no matter what.

The Apostle Paul expressed that truth in these triumphant words. As Paul wrote to the Christians in Rome:

Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Will hardship, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him

who loved us.

WHEN I FIRST READ Catherine Moore's story about the great change in her father, I was quite moved. That story made me remember the unconditional love, which I have received from various special pets

in my life. It made me recall, the soulful brown eyes, the uplifted paws, and the seemingly unlimited forgiveness and understanding my pets have always given me.

As someone once prayed, "O Lord, help me to be the person, my dog thinks I am." I think there is a lot of meaning in that comment.

CATHERINE MOORE believes that God sent that loving dog into her father's life, in response to her prayers. I share her belief, for it's my view that God's grace often does enter our lives, and answer our prayers, in such unexpected, surprising ways.

But let me take Catherine's belief a step further.

Isn't it possible that the unconditional love we humans often find in our pets, is a gift from God? And isn't that gift often meant to teach us humans about the true nature of God's love for us, and about how we should strive to love our fellow human beings?

OUR WORLD is filled with conditional loves. It is filled with conditional loves that build us up or tear us down, conditional loves that embrace us or reject us, depending upon how worthy someone else thinks we are.

Conditional loves are all around us. They go up and down like see-saws or stock market reports. But it is only an unconditional or "perfect" love--a love like God's love--which can fully satisfy our hearts, transform our lives, and cast out our fears.

God help us all, to receive and give to others, more love which truly is unconditional, that perfect love, which truly endures!

ENDNOTE

i. I've re-told and abbreviated this story based on the original account by Catherine Moore, which appeared on <http://www.heartwarmers4u.com>.