

"No Matter What!"
Psalm 107:1-3, 17-22

During the first half of the 20th century, many psychologists believed that showing affection towards children was merely a sentimental gesture that served no real purpose. Behaviorist John B. Watson once even went so far as to warn parents, "When you are tempted to pet your child, remember that mother's love is a dangerous instrument." According to many thinkers of the day, affection would only spread diseases and lead to adult psychological problems. During this time, psychologists were motivated to prove their field as a rigorous science. The behaviorist movement dominated psychology and urged researchers to study only observable and measurable behaviors. An American psychologist named Harry Harlow, however, became interested in studying a topic that was not so easy to quantify and measure: love. In a series of controversial experiments conducted in the 1960s, Harlow demonstrated the powerful effects of love. By showing the devastating effects of deprivation on young rhesus monkeys, Harlow revealed the importance of a mother's love for healthy childhood development. His experiments were often unethical and shockingly cruel, yet they uncovered fundamental truths that have heavily influenced our understanding of child development.

As human beings we have a deep need for affection and love. Yet, this need goes beyond what our human relationships can provide. The love of our parents, children, family members and friends can only fill a part of that need. Spiritually and theologically speaking, this need has been described as a God-shaped hole in our hearts. St. Augustine once wrote, "Our hearts are restless until they rest in Thee, O Lord." The interesting thing though in life is that we spend a great deal of our time feeling disconnected or even deprived from God's loving presence.

Psalm 107, which we read this morning, is a great antidote to this sense of disconnect. The main focus phrase is "God's steadfast love endures forever." This was not just some wild idea that someone in their congregation came up with. These words were based on the experience of the Israelites, the people of God, in their many experiences of pain in life. Biblical scholars believe that the Psalm was compiled after the exile ended in 536 BCE. The people had lost their homes and land. They lived for a couple of generations in exile and finally were able to go back to their home. But even in the worst of their times in history, the people knew that God was with them, redeeming and healing them. Even when the people missed the point of faith and sinned against God and their neighbors, God was still there with them. God is with desert wanderers, the people experiencing great pain and darkness (either spiritually or emotionally), the physically ill, and those on the abyss of the ocean.

God's love endures forever! So we give thanks to God not because our lives are perfect. We give thanks because God's love is ever so present with us. Our identity is that of a people who know God's presence is with us, no matter what the circumstances might be. When we suffer innocently or when we suffer because we missed the mark, God is with us. I am reminded of a children's song, "Jesus loves me when I am good, Jesus loves me when I am bad."

Annie Dillard acknowledges her own awe in the face of the mystery of God at work: "I don't know. I don't know beans about God." Still, she writes, "Nature works out its complexities. God suffers the world's necessities along with us, and suffers our turning away, and joins us in exile" (*For the Time Being*). Healing does not always take the form we expect (or want), but in any and every case, God is with us, "suffering the world's necessities" with us.

This knowledge is important for us to go about our lives with hope and faith. It is important for us to know that God is walking with us. The pressures are so tremendous on us in the world to

succeed and to make things happen. The powers and principalities that oppress us are so strong that we need a higher source of strength and healing. Our strength does not come from our own abilities to make it in the world. Even the richest people in the world or most powerful sooner or later find out that life is fragile and that most of life is not under our control. Yet, we keep trying to make life perfect and to make things work out just right for us.

A man visits his priest and reports that he feels like a complete failure. "I don't know what it is, but it seems I fail at half of the things I do," he complains. The priest says simply, "*World Book Almanac*, page seventy-four." The man returns the next day, visibly upset. "I came here at the end of my rope, looking for help and you offered me nothing." "Didn't you locate the information to which I directed you?" "Sure, but a baseball batting average of three hundred-something has nothing to do with me or my feelings of depression!" "Sure it does," responded the priest. "You see, it's simple, here's a professional player celebrated for holding the world record even though he failed two out of three times he got up to bat. If you are batting 500, all I can say to you is, keep up the great work!"

This story puts things in perspective for us as we are driven to push hard and to make things just perfect. What is really valuable and successful in life may not be the first thing that comes to mind. It may not be what we grew up dreaming about. One of the things that often amaze Americans when they visit "Third World" countries, is the sense of joy that people have, even in the midst of the worst circumstances of poverty. What Americans come to discover very quickly is that the happiness the people have does not come from material possessions. It comes from relationships. It comes from a deep sense of connection to family, friends, community and to God.

Psalm 107 is a strong reminder for all of us about the redeeming and saving power of God's presence in our lives. It is about God's steadfast love, which in Hebrew, *hesed*, means a love that is so close to us that it has some blood connection to us. God's love to us is about our kinship to God. In the worldview of the Bible and Hebrew people, there is no closer connection in the world than that of family, where you never ever give up on your family members no matter what the circumstances might be.

Our thanksgiving to God is not about our percentage of success. It is about God's love being steadfast in our lives, enduring forever. It is not about forgetting about our problems and living in an imaginary world where there is no pain or danger. Our thanksgiving is for the relationship we have with God that is not conditional. God's love is unconditional! This is grace.

This of course is easy to deal with and imagine in cases of righteous people (people like us!), but it is very hard to accept when it comes to people we think deserve punishment. Last week, when Bernard Madoff pleaded guilty to the charges of cheating a lot of people out of their money, some news reporters were interviewing some of the people he cheated. All of them were saying things like, "I hope he burns in hell," or "I hope that he rots in prison," or "He deserves the worst punishment possible." Bernard Madoff, who pleaded guilty to operating a multibillion-dollar Ponzi scheme, is worth up to \$826 million, according to a document filed with a federal court last week. But even as we consider this case, I find myself asking, "How could God's love be steadfast for someone like Madoff?" or "Is there any hope for a human being that is corrupted by greed?" The answer is not in God's approval or overlooking of Madoff's schemes but is in the fact that God is always with us restoring us to wholeness no matter what we might be going through in life.

From National Geographic: "After a forest fire in Yellowstone National Park, forest rangers began their trek up a mountain to assess the inferno's damage. One ranger found a bird literally petrified in ashes, perched statuesquely on the ground at the base of a tree. Somewhat sickened by the eerie sight, he knocked over the bird with a stick. When he struck it, three little chicks scurried from under their dead mother's wings. The loving mother, keenly aware of impending disaster, had carried her offspring to the base of the tree and had gathered them under her wings, instinctively knowing that the toxic smoke would rise. She could have flown to safety but had refused to abandon her babies. When the blaze had arrived and the heat had scorched her small body, the mother had remained steadfast, because she had been willing to die; those under the cover of her wings would live."

There is no better image to describe God's steadfast love than this one. It is a love that never gives up on us. It is a love that is always with us no matter what!