

Mystic Congregational Church, UCC

Mystic, Connecticut

Sermon from March 21, 2010

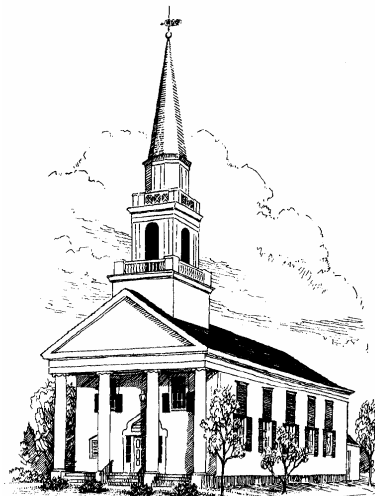
“Real Clues II”

Mr. Robert C. Haberman

Scriptures:

Isaiah 43:16-21

John 12:1-8



I can hear them hopping as I stand at the top of the stairs. It is 8 o'clock in the morning and we are about to start our daily ritual. As I descend the stairs the hopping becomes more intense. Approaching the glass door leading into the family room they see me and leap several feet in the air. It is a beautiful sight. I can't help but laugh and smile. Opening the door I kneel down on the floor and get smothered with kisses. So starts my day. This is followed by doggie biscuits and a 3-mile jog on the river road. Perhaps the biscuits and jog have something to do with their affection.

Young children are great at showing unabashed affection. Back in February, Connie and I, along with my son and his family, took a winter vacation in Puerto Rico. We've been going to the same place for years, and it is perfect for a family with children. The children are Sydney and David, ages 5 and 8. Sydney loves to play the card game, "Go Fish", and you can see the affection in her eyes while playing the game with her father. Affection also carries over to dinner when she and her brother always want to sit next to Pop-pop; that's me. Grace is my other granddaughter. She lives in Atlanta with her brother Joseph. Joseph is 9 and Grace is 5. She is 5 days older than Sydney and beats me nearly every time at the "Farm Game"; a memory game that is to my disadvantage. She and Joseph also require Pop-pop to sit next to them while eating. We see them about four times every year and when departing, Grace always cries, followed by Pop-pop getting some moist eyes. Many of you have children, grandchildren and I suspect a few have great-grandchildren, and I'm sure you could share similar stories. A special gift they give us is love and affection, and we return that gift.

Outward displays of devotion and affection are of course not limited to children. In adults they are noticeably displayed during times of joy and during times of sorrow. At a celebration, wedding, baptism, graduation, we offer congratulations and sometimes tears of joy. And when a loved one is approaching the end of life, we offer compassion, we hold their hand, we hug them, we tell them we love them.

"Mary took a pound of costly perfume made of pure nard, anointed Jesus' feet, and wiped them with her hair. The house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume". Mary loved Jesus. She understood who Jesus is, understood his message, and understood his eventual fate. According to C.S. Lewis, Jesus opened her eyes to pure Goodness.

There are four accounts of this story in the Gospels. Three are nearly identical. Matthew and Mark talk of a woman who anoints Jesus' head with ointment, Luke talks of a woman who has sinned, and anoints Jesus' feet with her tears, and we have the story of Mary from the Gospel of John. The writers of the New Testament want to clearly show evidence of love and devotion to Jesus.

For the past 2000 years there have been countless individuals that have shown love and devotion to Jesus. Besides the disciples and Paul, ordinary people and Saints have devoted their lives to Jesus. Five contemporary examples are Leo Tolstoy, 19th-century author of "War and Peace", Gandhi, Martin Luther King, Mother Teresa and Albert Schweitzer. Leo Tolstoy, toward the end of his life focused his efforts on Jesus' message of non-violent/ passive resistance; Gandhi, after reading Tolstoy's' book, "The Kingdom of God is Within You", put to practice passive resistance; Martin Luther King also put to practice passive resistance during the civil rights movement; Mother Teresa devoted her life to helping the most destitute in India, providing compassion to those near death; and Albert Schweitzer left Germany with three Doctor degrees—medicine, philosophy and theology, and went into the interior of Africa to establish schools for education and hospitals to save lives. I could also add to this list some members of our congregation, but to avoid any embarrassment I won't mention names.

What all these people have in common is that they loved Jesus, and from this love wonderful things happened. God's work is carried out. They have taken Jesus' message literally, his great commandment: "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul and with all your mind".

Now I pose the question, "Do you love God"?

When I was in Sunday school at Saint Mark's Lutheran Church in Yonkers, New York, I was told I should love God. Well, I was able to learn the Ten Commandments, memorize the Apostles Creed, the Nicene Creed, many passages from the bible, the name of all the books of the bible and during my two years of confirmation study was required to write a summary of the pastor's weekly sermon. I guess it is no wonder I had trouble loving God. In any case, no matter how hard I tried or how hard I prayed I could not love God. To help, I was told God is like your parents, loving you and looking out for you. I loved my parents, but still I could not love God. You cannot learn love, you cannot will love. Perhaps some of you here today were faced with the same dilemma.

If you start looking in the Old Testament for a warm and cuddly God to love, you will be very disappointed. Exodus 20:5," You shall not bow down to them in worship (false gods, idols); for I the Lord your God am a jealous God, punishing children for the iniquity of parents, to the third and fourth generation of those who reject me". And then there is the book of Job. You know the story. God gives Satan the power to take away Job's property, servants and children, inflicts Job with disease, all for the purpose of testing Job's faith. Three "friends" visit Job to console him, and argue that he must have done something wrong to deserve this fate. Job maintains his innocence and faith. At the end of the story he pleads his case to God, and God does not provide a very sympathetic response. Basically, God expounds on his creation and does not directly address Job's grievances. He is a God of *Shock and Awe* plus *Fear Factor*; a difficult God to love.

A better place to look for a God to love is of course the New Testament. Rather than fear, we find just the opposite; a God of understanding, compassion, forgiveness, love; characteristics that can clearly draw us closer to God. We read about them, hear them preached from the pulpit, and discuss them in bible study. They stir our mind and our spirit, but for some of us, they are not enough to take the leap and love God.

Are there other places to look for evidence to love God? You may remember last year I gave a sermon called “Real Clues” and in that sermon I suggested five clues for the existence of God. So in the style of that sermon let’s now find some clues, some reasons to love God, but now on a more personal level. One obvious clue might be answered prayer. Certainly an answered prayer request that involves the well being of oneself or loved one could establish a loving relationship between you and God. Another might be special coincidences, coincidences that may appear insignificant to everyone else, but directly touch your spirit. I’m not going to talk about these clues, but rather a clue that is staring us right in the face and we may not see it. To help identify that clue let’s start by considering a book taken from classical literature.

The book is “Les Miserables” by Victor Hugo. A book that I’m sure many of you have read, or if not, have perhaps seen the movie or Broadway musical. At the beginning of the story Jean Valjean is sentenced to prison for stealing bread for his starving family. Upon his release many years later he is required to carry a yellow passport that identifies him as a convict. This makes it difficult to find lodgings, but eventually a Bishop takes him in and provides food and shelter. In the middle of the night he steals the Bishop’s silverware and runs away, but is captured by the police and brought back to the Bishop. Showing extraordinary grace, the Bishop tells the police the silverware was a gift, and by the way he forgot to also take two candlesticks. “Jean Valjean, my brother: you belong no longer to evil. but to good. It is your soul I am buying for you. I withdraw it from dark thoughts and from the spirit of perdition, and I give it to God”. In an instant Jean Valjean’s life is transformed. Not by the value of the silverware and candlesticks, but by a renewal of his soul, a renewal of his spirit, a renewal of the ability to love.

Jean Valjean is of course a character from fiction, but his transformation is not fictional. We have not had the same experiences, but each of us in our journey through life knows what love is. As I mentioned at the beginning of the sermon, love is most evident during times of joy and during times of sorrow. We have no control over it, it just happens. When we were children waking up with nightmares and are comforted by our parents, when we experience that first kiss, when we find that person we want to spend the rest of our life with, when we look at our children moments after they are born, when they go on the school bus for their first day of school, when someone dear to us is suffering or approaching the end of life. We have no control over it, it just happens.

Step back 2000 years ... The room is filled with laughter and good cheer. I look across the room and see Him talking to His friends. My brother Lazarus cannot thank Him enough. I think Jesus is getting embarrassed. Tomorrow they are going into Jerusalem and I worry about Him. Many people adore Him, but rumor has it the temple priests are afraid of Him. Is there something, anything I can do that tells Him I care? “Mary took a pound of costly perfume made of pure nard, anointed Jesus’ feet, and wiped them with her hair. The house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume”. We have no control over it, it just happens. Love is a gift

that transcends our material world, it is the ultimate reality. It is The Real Clue.

But what is the source of this gift, where does it come from? “Beloved, let us love one another; for love is of God, and he who loves is born of God and knows God. He who does not love does not know God; for God is Love”. These are the familiar words from the first letter of John 4:7-8. God has given to each of us a part of Himself; the gift of love. We should return a portion of that gift.

Amen.