

Story and Meditation: Who God Loves

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Acts 10:44-48

John 15:9-17

by *Eric Anderson*

In the 'apapane nest there were three chicks. Two were about the usual amount of work for an 'apapane child: feeding, more feeding, keeping them warm and dry, preening their feathers, and cleaning up after them. None of that is necessarily easy, mind you, but it's not out of the ordinary.

The third chick – well, the third chick was trouble. In fact, that's what everybody started to call her: Trouble. Her brother called her Trouble. Her sister called her Trouble. Her parents didn't call her Trouble, quite, but when there was a sudden outburst of noise from the nest they'd look at one another and sigh, "There's Trouble."

'Apapane like to have a quiet nest, but Trouble – we might as well call her that, too – didn't know anything about quiet or if she did she wasn't interested in taking part in it. She screamed when she was hungry. She screamed when she was cold. She screamed at her brother and sister and pushed them out of the way when father or mother came by with food. Sometimes she pecked at them. Sometimes she pecked at her mother.

Mother for her part, tended to quiet the screaming with an 'apapane embrace or a carefully placed caterpillar. She stepped between the squalling chicks to end the pecking, and a couple of times pulled Trouble away with a foot.

Trouble wasn't actually a mean chick. She was impulsive and not very aware of anyone else around her. When the screaming was done, she was generally quite sorry about all the noise and the pecking and the scratching. Her behavior improved a little bit when she was chastised by her parents, but in her brother and sister's opinion, things weren't getting better fast enough.

One day mother returned to the nest to find Trouble screeching and her brother and sister wrestling her to the side of the nest. "Don't feed her, Mom!" yelled brother. "She's been pecking us again!"

"Give her a hard peck, Mom!" yelled sister. "Trouble is the worst!"

Mother did nothing of the kind. She separated the fighting fledglings and got them settled, breathing hard, at opposite sides of the nest.

"Why do you put up with her, Mom?" demanded brother. "She's the worst!" echoed sister.

“When you hatched,” said Mother, “I promised myself and you that I would always love you.”

“But she’s unlovable!”

“I promised,” said mother again, “that I would always make sure you had the care you needed. That’s one of the things that love is. I’m going to keep that promise.”

Trouble’s brother and sister were silent and sullen.

“Someday none of you will need this much care. You’re growing quickly. You’ll need less. And I will always care for you as you need it, as long as I can. All of you. All of you.”

The days and months passed, and Trouble was a mother herself, standing on the edge of her nest and looking down at squalling chicks. They were hungry. They were fighting. They were Trouble. She opened her beak to scream at them.

Then she closed it. If her mother could love her so much as to keep her well and fed, then perhaps she could do it, too. So just like her mother, she sheltered them beneath her wings and loved them all.

In economics, one of the key concepts is scarcity. Scarcity is related to value.

When something is plentiful, according to this principle, it tends to fetch a lower price. When something is relatively scarce, it fetches a higher price. Sometimes scarcity is due to natural conditions which reduce the supply of a particular resource. Sometimes it is due to human conditions, as when a particular skill is rare. Sometimes it is due to human manipulation. In the 1970s, three wealthy men decided to “corner the market” on silver. As the end of the decade approached, it’s estimated that they held one third of the world’s supply. With that much silver unavailable to anyone else to use and mining operations unable to compensate, the price of silver soared. Between January 1, 1979, and January 18, 1980, the price of silver rose 713%.

That was a contrived scarcity.

We live with this sort of thing all the time. We understand it in the grocery store – the rarer the food item, the higher the price. We understand it in the jewelry store – the rarer the gem, the higher the price. We understand it in the area of wages and compensation – the more people who are capable of doing a job, by and large, the less we pay for it. If fewer people are considered able to do a job, then we pay more for it. Wages and compensation are influenced by far more factors than just scarcity, but it is one of the big ones.

There is one area of life where we might not want to bring the idea of scarcity, and yet we do. It’s to faith. It’s to spirituality. It’s to religion. It’s to Christianity.

Because the love of God is not scarce.

It is also of value beyond human measure. But it is not scarce.

Simon Peter thought it would be scarce. That formed some of the background for his interactions with Jesus during their time traveling together. “You are the Christ!” he said, but also, “Don’t lose your life to save ours.” “Depart from me,” he told Jesus early on, “because I am a sinful man.” “Master, you can’t know who touched you in this crowd.” “Let me make booths for you and Moses and Elijah because I don’t know what else to say.” “You shall never wash my feet.”

Jesus’ own practice should have shown Peter that his – Jesus’ – love was wider than others he knew, and that God’s love was just as wide. Jesus ate with the respectable people, including those he argued with, but he also ate with the people people didn’t invite to their home: unmarried women, tax collectors, even a foreigner or two. Before Jesus began that lengthy speech during the Last Supper recorded in John 15, he sat his disciples down and washed their feet.

Simon Peter, by the time he found himself in the house of the Roman centurion Cornelius, had had abundant demonstrations that the usual realities of scarcity just simply didn’t apply to the love of God – yet that idea of scarcity still possessed his thinking. As Amy Lindemann Allen observes at Working Preacher, he resisted the urging of the Holy Spirit repeatedly. He didn’t stop resisting until the moment recounted in verse 44 – “While Peter was still speaking, the Holy Spirit fell upon all who heard the word.” The Holy Spirit had come to the followers of Jesus before, inspired Peter’s sermon on Pentecost and empowered healing in Jesus’ name, but in this moment the Holy Spirit was inspiring Gentiles. Foreigners. Romans. People who spoke Latin, not Hebrew. People beyond the circle of God’s concern.

Them.

In that moment, Peter realized that God’s love was not, is not, will not be scarce. In that moment, Peter realized that God’s love flows in imagination-defying abundance. In that moment, Peter realized that his understanding of who God loves had to change.

Who God loves is... everyone.

We live our lives aware of scarcity. We can’t really help it. For one thing, there are those different prices in the grocery store. Beyond that, though: Finitude – limits – are realities of human existence. So it’s probably natural and certainly understandable that we bring that same assumption to our awareness of God. Natural, understandable, and entirely wrong.

Oswaldo Vena writes at Working Preacher, “I often wonder what would the church look like if its distinctive sign would have been the towel and the basin rather than the cross and the empty tomb. Instead of redemptive suffering — which has justified so much bloodshed through the

idea of the Christus Victor, from the Crusades, to the Conquest, to the Holocaust — we would have love, the giving of oneself for the other.”

I wonder, too.

Whether we find our awareness of God’s abundant love in the towel and the basin, or in the bread and fish shared on a Galilean hillside, or in the cross and the empty tomb, or in the sound of voices praising God in Latin: find that awareness. Cling to that awareness. Expand that awareness. Rejoice in that awareness.

God’s love abounds for you and for all.

Who God loves is: everyone.

Amen.