

Sermon for Sunday, September 15, 1974 by Andrew A. Jumper, D.D., Pastor
Central Presbyterian Church, St. Louis, Missouri

"THE CRAZY THING CHRISTIANS DO

I John 4:7-21

Text: "Beloved, if God so loved us, we also ought to love one another."

I John 4:11

Last Sunday our sermon was entitled, "The Crazy Thing God Did." Between services one of my Deacons came to me and said, "What in the world is the crazy thing God did? I can't get anybody to tell me!" Well, I laughed and said, "I guess you'll just have to come to second service and find out!" But the crazy thing God did is recorded in John 3:16, "God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life." Yes, that is the crazy thing God did--he gave his Son for us. Last Sunday I talked about what it cost Jesus to die for us, the suffering, the agony, the pain, the inner spiritual anguish of bearing the sins of the whole world, and I asked if anybody felt worthy of such a love, if anybody felt they deserved that kind of sacrifice.

Well, you know the answer to that. None of us do. God loved us when we were unlovely. He loved us when we were sinners. As the Bible puts it, "For while we were yet sinners, Christ died for the ungodly." So, if you are a Christian this morning; if you know what it is to be saved, to be forgiven, and to have eternal life, it is not because of anything you did. It is because Jesus died for you when you didn't deserve it, when you were unworthy of it.

Now, the Bible has a special word for that love of God. It is the Greek word Agape. It is love that is uncaused, undeserved, unmerited--love that is freely given. And aren't you glad for that? All of us are sinners and none of us can earn or deserve God's love. But God loved us with a holy love, a giving love, a love that reached out to us even when we didn't dare expect it. Yes, that's the crazy thing God did. As we read in our scripture lesson this morning, "In this the love of God was made manifest among us, that God sent his only Son into the world, so that we might live through him." And then the Bible goes on to add, "And this is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the expiation for our sins."

So whoever you are this morning, God did a crazy thing for you--when you were unlovely, unloving and unlovable, God sent Jesus to die in your place that you might live. But then the Bible tells us another crazy thing. The Bible tells us that Christians ought to be just as crazy as God. The Bible says, "Beloved, if God so loved us, we also ought to love one another."

Now, when you stop to think about it, that really is a crazy thing. Does God expect us to love somebody who commits some sin that shocks us and offends our sensibilities? Well, that's the crazy thing God did for you and me and he tells us to do the same crazy thing. Does God expect us not to cast stones at people who make mistakes that violate his laws? Well, Jesus said for the person without sin to throw the first rock so that is exactly the crazy thing he expects us to do. And when somebody does something wrong and it makes the papers and the person is publically punished by the judicial system, aren't we supposed to write them off because of their sin? Well, no, the Bible says we are to keep on loving them with the same crazy love God has for us.

One time Jesus said, "You have heard that it has been said, 'you shall love your

neighbor and hate your enemy.' But I say to you, love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you, and pray for them which despitefully use you, and persecute you." And isn't that a crazy thing to do? But the Bible says, "for while we were yet enemies, Christ died for the ungodly." That's the crazy thing God did and that's the crazy thing he asks us to do.

A man once went to his minister and confessed he had a problem about the Bible. He said, "I am perplexed about something in the Bible. The Bible says of God, 'Jacob I have I loved, but Esau I have I hated.' I just can't understand why God hated Esau." "Well," said the pastor, I have always been perplexed by that passage, too. However, the thing that always puzzled me was how God was crazy enough to love Jacob." Remember the hymn, "Amazing grace, how sweet the sound, that saved a wretch like me"? Yes, that is the truly amazing thing, that God did a crazy thing like loving us. And then he turns right around and the Bible tells us that if God so loved us, we ought so to love one another.

Are there any restrictions on your love this morning? Can you love the wineo sleeping on some doorstep in the slums? God does. Can you love the person drawing welfare and living on food stamps when it makes your taxes go up? God does. Can you love the boy that goes wrong, gets in trouble and has to report to the juvenile authorities? God does. Can you love the girl that goes wrong, or makes a mistake and has to live with the consequence of it the rest of her life? God does. I think about Peter denying Jesus three times and Jesus did a crazy thing because he never quit loving Peter. There are no restrictions on God's love--it is a forgiving love, it is an undeserved love, and that's the crazy thing God did. And right on top of that comes the Biblical injunction, "if God so loved us, we ought also to love one another."

You know, God sees the potential we have in our lives. Can you remember the motley crew Jesus assembled to be his disciples? There was probably no more unlikely group ever assembled for such an incredible job. But Jesus saw the potential in them, the beauty of possibility, that they had. There is an old legend that tells of Jesus' return to heaven and the angels ask him what he has left behind to insure that his mission on earth will be accomplished. Jesus replied, "I left behind eleven men who love me," "What," say the angels, "you left everything in the hands of eleven men? What if they fail you?" "I know them," replied Jesus, "they will not fail me." And in spite of their sins, their limitations, they did not fail him and the world finally complained that they had turned everything upside down. It reminds me of a little story told by Flannery O'Connor. Flannery wrote some beautiful Christian stories before she died about ten years ago. Her hobby was raising peacocks. She tells of a telephone repairman and his response one day to one of her male peacocks whose tail plumage was spread out in all of its glory. She wrote, "The bird turned slightly to the right and the little planets above him in his tail hung in bronze, then he turned slightly to the left and they were hung in green..." "Well, what do you think of that," I asked. "Never saw such long ugly legs," the repairman replied, "I bet that rascal could outrun a bus." Well, that's what we see in people sometimes. We see something about them that is bad or ugly or sinful, but God does a crazy thing, he sees the tail feathers, the beauty and potential of a person and he loves him in spite of his ugly legs. And then he tells us to do the same crazy thing, to love others as he loves us.

It is an easy thing to tear people down for some fault or some sin. Dr. Charles Allen tells the story of a boy who was a problem child from the time he was in the first grade. Almost every teacher he had assumed he was a hopeless case. It was

discovered the boys parents had a cruel tendency to find fault. And I suppose, if you are looking for the ugly legs instead of the tail feathers, all of us can find fault with each other. The boy was beaten, shouted at and ridiculed for his mistakes. At sixteen the boy had quit school and he went to work for the manager of an amusement park. The manager was not a trained psychologist, but he did have a kind, understanding heart. He was a man of love and it was natural for him to praise and thank the boy for each job which he did well. Little by little the boy quit thinking of his failures as his heart received the one thing he needed--forgiveness and love. And I suppose we all need that--and the Bible says that is the crazy thing Christians do.

Ardis Whitman in a book entitled The Invitation to Live, tells a story that I want to share with you. The story goes like this: "It happened when I was a small child in a village in Nova Scotia. The mother of a family not far from us had died, and the father, often drunk, was unable to care for his children; so a woman in the community had taken one of the boys to live with her. Widowed, poor and uneducated, she nevertheless had love and energy to spare for the shivering, surly child. Almost overnight he began to change, to grow and blossom. But one thing held him back; because he was strange to us, none of us would play with him. One day, his foster mother caught us frolicking while he stood to one side, weeping and rejected. She sent him into the house and then turned on us, 'I won't have it!' she stormed. 'That child matters. It's being decided right now whether he's going to be somebody, and every time I get him ahead an inch you children push him back. Don't you want him to live?" Then the author writes, "Many years have passed, but I have not forgotten the incident. It was my first brush with the profound and painful knowledge that people heal, and people destroy." Yes, don't you want him to live?

God did a crazy thing--he loved us and forgave us when we didn't deserve it. And then he asks us to do the same crazy thing for the Bible says, "If God so loved us, we also ought to love one another." Yes, people can look at the peacock's ugly legs or the beauty of his tail just as they can look at a person's sins and his past or look at the beauty of his potential. You see, people can heal or people can destroy. It depends on whether or not they want a person to live. I suppose the Bible puts it as simply as it can be said. The Bible says, "If any one says, 'I love God', and hates his brother, he is a liar."

There are a lot of things in my past that I'm not proud of and I'm far from perfect today. Because you are a sinful human being just as I am, I know the same is true for you. Thank God that he loves us anyway and sent Jesus to die for us and if we love God, then we love one another with an uncaused, undeserved and forgiving love. And that's the crazy thing Christians do.