

The Congregational Church in South Glastonbury

GOD'S SUSTAINING LOVE

Laity Sunday, October 9, 2005

Sermon Delivered by Douglas G. Adkins

A popular, self-help book first published in the late 1970's begins with this simple sentence: Life is difficult. The author goes on to note that this is a great truth; indeed, one of the greatest truths. To emphasize his point, the author cites Buddha's first of "Four Noble Truths" which is that "Life is suffering."

I don't think you need to tell the people of the Gulf Coast that life is difficult, or the folks in Africa whose communities are being ravaged by the AIDS epidemic. I don't think you need to tell a Glastonbury family who lost a son, a brother, last week that life is difficult, although they may not use words but rather tears to reflect this truth. No, I also don't think you need to tell those who suffer from serious health problems, or grapple with debilitating addictions, or feel the pain of broken relationships that life is difficult. I think they understand it—they get it, although they too may reflect this truth differently, using other words or emotions—maybe anger, resignation, bitterness, or deep sadness.

I think our collective wisdom as human beings accepts this truth, that life is difficult. Oh, we may differ on our assessment of how difficult life truly is, and there certainly is differing degrees of difficulty. I'm not going to stand before you and pretend that my life is somehow equally or more difficult than others who have been less fortunate.

Also, the degree of difficulty certainly fluctuates as we move through life. You may be in a period of relative ease as you sit in your pew today, while the person sitting behind you or in front of you may be in the most difficult time of his or her life. Or, maybe the situation is reversed. I suspect that Jesus had periods in his life of tremendous happiness and peace. I do know that he had periods of tremendous difficulty and suffering. I don't think these relative differences in degrees of difficulty or timing in any way undermine this central truth—Life is difficult.

Why is life difficult? I don't know. I wish that I did. I could then make sense of life's tragedies or help my children understand and deal with life's twists and turns. At the least, it would help provide some perspective; help answer the question so often asked in exasperated desperation, why did this have to happen? Oh, I have heard some different explanations for why life is difficult. As rationale arguments trying to answer a profound question, they seem to make sense. On a visceral level, however—a gut check—they don't do it for me. The mystery continues.

If we stopped here this morning, this would be a pretty depressing message. We would probably get up from our pews a little slower or not smile as widely as we otherwise would. But the message does not stop here. God did not leave Jesus on the cross or in the tomb, but raised his life up for an Easter Day.

There is an equally transcendent truth that is universally recognized by all the great religions throughout the world. That truth is that God loves us. In times of great difficulty, in times of great need, in times of great challenges, God loves us--all of us. Not the mushy, “warm and fuzzy”, feel good, love. No, candidly, that kind of love does not cut it when we are in deep crisis. God loves us in a deeper, more enduring way—a way that we can experience. God loves us by inviting us into an ongoing and sustaining relationship. God loves us by being available and present in our lives. God loves us by listening to us, when we need to be heard. God loves us by making God's power available to sustain us throughout our days as we grapple with these challenges and difficulties that life inevitably tosses at us.

God's love is experienced through the gifts provided; the gift of Hope which allows us to imagine a future, better than the present, and gives us the energy to move forward in that direction; the gift of Forgiveness which allows us to move beyond the mistakes and errors of our past—to look forward, not back, to not be destroyed, consumed or otherwise preoccupied by our history. God's love is experienced in the gift of Jesus Christ who, through his life and words, provides powerful, spiritual guidance to us all.

I know a person who drank to excess for many years. In the course of doing so, this person made mistakes and has regrets that are carried to this day. You may know someone like this. But one day, this person decided not to take that drink ever again. To embark down a path of recovery, with

God's help through AA, and is now an inspiration—to those who may struggle with addiction, and to family and friends who see a real life example of resurrection.

I learned of a person who, as a young man, struggled with depression and ultimately was committed to a sanitarium for four months after he tried to kill himself. His name is Harry Emerson Fosdick. You may have heard of this man. He overcame those difficulties and went on to become one of the preeminent preachers of his day. On any given Sunday in the 1930s, people would wait in line outside of Riverside Church, in New York City, to hear him preach a gospel of peace, equality and transcendent love.

Rev. Fosdick referred to this period of illness as the “most hideous experience,” his “inner hell,” and “a terrifying wilderness.” You can feel his pain when you hear these words. You may know someone in a similar situation who is struggling with their own “inner hell” or are lost in their own “terrifying wilderness.”

That “most hideous experience,” however, drove Rev. Fosdick away from teaching religion toward a life in the pulpit with an emphasis on pastoral counseling. Why? Because Rev. Fosdick fully experienced God's love. He explained that, during this trying time (and I quote), “I learned to pray not because I had adequately argued out prayer's rationality, but because I desperately needed help from a Power greater than my own. He added, “I learned that God, much more than a theological proposition, is an immediately available resource.”

How powerful is that message? Experiential love--Experiencing God's love, first hand. The love that resurrects and sustains. God's love is real and is unconditional. It is as available to the convict as it is to the saint. It does not differentiate between Moslem, Buddhist, or Christian, nor does it distinguish between Southern Baptist, Lutheran, or Congregationalist.

The fact that God's love is unconditional and can be experienced, however, does not mean that we have no role here. We do. Our role is to be receptive to God's love. To love God with all of our heart, mind and soul. Again, not the mushy, emotional, feel good love. No. Love as in making time for God, to be in relationship with God. Love as in trusting God...“Not my will, but thine be done.” Love as in listening to God, really listening to God, even when God delivers a message that

we do not want to hear, shames us by our actions, or moves us in a direction that we do not want to go.

I feel for the atheist who denies God's existence. What a Catch 22 he creates—namely, God does not exist because I have not experienced God. But how can he experience God when he is completely unreceptive to God's love. But aren't we often like the atheist in a way, creating our own barriers to God? How about the time crunch where we fill our days with so many tasks, responsibilities and projects that the opportunities to be in relationship with God are set aside for another day. Or, how about the way we imagine God such that we are only receptive to a God that fits that image. The anthropomorphic God or the God that should answer all of our prayers and requests as expressly set forth each day. And if God does not comply, God does not exist. What about the barriers created by fear, distrust, self-interest, ego or doubt?

Ironically, we are often most receptive to God's love in times of crisis or difficulty. In such times, we realize our inadequacies and are open to—even expressly call on—God's help, as Rev. Fosdick did so long ago. We throw away the academic postulations and debates about God and religion. Instead, we humbly ask for help—God, please help me.

Yes, I recognize and accept the truth that life is difficult. I also recognize, accept and celebrate the truth that God loves us. In times of great difficulty, crisis or need, there is tremendous love. We are with, and of, God always. Let us tear down those barriers and open ourselves to God, ready and willing to receive that love which transcends and overcomes all. God loves us, and that enduring and resurrecting love can—and will—sustain us, throughout our days.

So be it....Amen