

Isaiah 6:1-8

¹In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord sitting on a throne, high and lofty; and the hem of his robe filled the temple. ²Seraphs were in attendance above him; each had six wings: with two they covered their faces, and with two they covered their feet, and with two they flew. ³And one called to another and said: “Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory.” ⁴The pivots on the thresholds shook at the voices of those who called, and the house filled with smoke. ⁵And I said: “Woe is me! I am lost, for I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips; yet my eyes have seen the King, the LORD of hosts!” ⁶Then one of the seraphs flew to me, holding a live coal that had been taken from the altar with a pair of tongs. ⁷The seraph touched my mouth with it and said: “Now that this has touched your lips, your guilt has departed and your sin is blotted out.” ⁸Then I heard the voice of the Lord saying, “Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?” And I said, “Here am I; send me!”

Psalms 29 (UMH 761)

Romans 8:12-17

¹²So then, brothers and sisters we are debtors, not to the flesh, to live according to the flesh—¹³for if you live according to the flesh, you will die; but if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live. ¹⁴For all who are led by the Spirit of God are children of God. ¹⁵For you did not receive a spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received a spirit of adoption. When we cry, “Abba! Father!” ¹⁶it is that very Spirit bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God, ¹⁷and if children, then heirs, heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ—if, in fact, we suffer with him so that we may also be glorified with him.

John 3:1-17

¹Now there was a Pharisee named Nicodemus, a leader of the Jews. ²He came to Jesus by night and said to him, “Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God; for no one can do these signs that you do apart from the presence of God.” ³Jesus answered him, “Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above.” ⁴Nicodemus said to him, “How can anyone be born after having grown old? Can one enter a second time into the mother’s womb and be born?” ⁵Jesus answered, “Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit. ⁶What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit. ⁷Do not be astonished that I said to you, ‘You must be born from above.’ ⁸The wind blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit.” ⁹Nicodemus said to him, “How can these things be?” ¹⁰Jesus answered him, “Are you a teacher of Israel, and yet you do not understand these things? ¹¹“Very truly, I tell you, we speak of what we know and testify to what we have seen; yet you do not receive our testimony. ¹²If I have told you about earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you about heavenly things? ¹³No one has ascended into heaven except the one who descended from heaven, the Son of Man. ¹⁴And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, ¹⁵that whoever believes in him may have eternal life. ¹⁶“For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal

life. ¹⁷“Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.

The New Revised Standard Version of the Bible with Apocrypha

Love is all Around Us

Last week Carol and I borrowed a bunch of DVD's from some friends. There were children's videos for us to watch with our granddaughter Kayla, a few of what I would refer to as chick flicks, and a couple of comedies. Carol wanted to watch one of them and ask me to choose one to watch. I picked out the movie "Love Actually" and we watched that.

Set almost entirely in London, England during five frantic weeks before Christmas, 2003, "Love Actually" follows a web-like pattern of inter-related, loosely related and unrelated stories of a dozen or more various individuals with their love lives, or lack of them. The characters are falling in love, falling out of love, some are with the right people, some are with the wrong people, some are looking to have an affair, and some are in the period of mourning.. Love begins and love ends. A father's love for his son, the son's love of a schoolmate, a sister's love for her brother - unrequited love, romantic love.

One of the characters in the movie is an aging pop singer named Billy Mack. Billy is foulmouthed, cynical, and lecherous. He has been through good times and bad times with his manager over the last 30 years or so. Billy is recording a Christmas version of his hit song from many years ago; trying to regain some of the fame and fortune, the former glory that he had lost long ago. The song he sings is called "Love is All Around Me" and it turns into the theme song of the movie. As the movie progresses, you hear bits of the song again and again. Actually the song "Love is All Around Me" was by the British pop group called the Troggs, whose big hit was the song "Wild Thing". Some of you who remember the 60's may remember those songs.

As I was thinking about the sermon this morning, that song came to me. It seemed to be a fitting description of today's gospel reading. The words of the song start out: *"I feel it in my fingers, I feel it in my toes. Love is all around me, and so the feeling grows. It's written on the wind, it's everywhere I go. So if you really love me, come on and let it show."* I thought about those words when I read today's passage from John's gospel.

John tells of Jesus being visited one night by a Pharisee named Nicodemus. One preacher whose sermon I read referred to the story as “Nick at Night”. You may already be familiar with the tale. Nicodemus wants to talk to Jesus about the things that Jesus has been preaching. Jesus tells him, *“Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above.”* The Greek word for “above” that John used can also be translated as “again”, but the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible translates it as above. So if someone asks you whether you have been born again, you can tell them that actually you have been born from above. See what kind of reaction that gets.

Nicodemus doesn't understand what Jesus is trying to say, so he tries to clarify. *“Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit. ⁶What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit. ⁷Do not be astonished that I said to you, ‘You must be born from above.’ ⁸The wind blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit.”*

Poor Nicodemus is still confused, so Jesus continues ¹³*No one has ascended into heaven except the one who descended from heaven, the Son of Man. ¹⁴And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, ¹⁵that whoever believes in him may have eternal life. ¹⁶“For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life. ¹⁷“Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.*

Jesus, in effect tells Nicodemus that love is all around us, Gods love. It's written on the wind. It's everywhere you go.

When Richard Nixon ran for President in 1968, the Vietnam War was at its height. One of Nixon's TV commercials showed a photo of an American soldier in Vietnam with the word "Love" written on his helmet. The image bothered Harry Treleavan, one of Nixon's media advisors. "It reminds [people] of hippies," he said. "They don't think it's the sort of thing soldiers should be writing on their helmets."

About a week later, however, a letter arrived from the mother of the soldier. She said how thrilled she was to see the photo of her son in Nixon's TV commercial. She wondered if she could obtain a copy of the photo. The letter was signed "Mrs. William Love." That's an interesting story. The soldier was not making a statement about his feelings after all. He was simply putting his name, Love, on his helmet.

What is love? Love is Jesus Christ giving his life for a sinful world. That is love in its purest sense. That is love without reservation. That is love that asks nothing in return. All other love pales in comparison. A parent loves his or her children, but often expects in return respect and companionship. A husband loves his wife. He expects in return her fidelity, her emotional support, her physical intimacy. When Christ loves, when God loves, however, He loves without condition. That is what love is all about.

Sue Monk Kidd was pregnant with her second child. Her three-year-old son, Bob, was afraid of the dark. Sue tried everything. She tried leaving a light on in the hall and a night-light on in Bob's room. Nothing she did helped; he was still scared of the dark and would cry out in the middle of the night. One night as she held him against her to comfort him, he touched her round tummy. Little Bob asked, *"Mama, is it dark inside there where my little brother is?"* He was convinced that the baby inside her would be a boy.

"Yes," his mother replied, *"it's dark in there."*

As Bob thought further he asked, *"He doesn't even have a night-light, does he?"*

"No," She responded, *"not even a night-light."* Then Bob hugged his mother as she patted his head. Bob had one more question for this mother, *"Do you think my brother is scared all by himself in there?"*

"I don't think so," Sue explained, *"because he's not really alone. He's inside of me,"* It was a very special moment between mother and son. Suddenly Sue had an inspiration. *"And it's the same way with you."* Sue explained to her son. *"When it's dark and you think you're all by yourself, you really aren't. I carry you inside me too. Right here in my heart."*

Sue remembers looking into her son's eyes, wondering if he understood what she meant. Having nothing else to say, Bob went back to bed and was soon asleep. That was the last time he woke up during the night scared. So it is with God. *"First God was only `up there'" explained Sue. "Then God was `all around.' Next I began to see that God was also `within me.' And now, most shocking of all," Sue says, "I was finding that I am, and always was `within God.'"*

Pastor Steve Goodier relates a story about loving others.

In the "Journal of the American Medical Association," Dr. Paul Ruskin demonstrated how our perception of reality (not actually what is going on, but how we perceive it) determines how we feel about it. While teaching a class on the psychological aspects of aging, he read the following case to his students:

"The patient neither speaks nor comprehends the spoken word. Sometimes she babbles incoherently for hours on end. She is disoriented about person, place, and time. She does, however, respond to her name. I have worked with her for the past six months, but she still shows complete disregard for her physical appearance and makes no effort to assist her own care. She must be fed, bathed, and clothed by others. Because she has no teeth, her food must be pureed. Her shirt is usually soiled from almost incessant drooling. She does not walk. Her sleep pattern is erratic. Often she wakes in the middle of the night, and her screaming awakens others. Most of the time she is friendly and happy, but several times a day she gets quite agitated without apparent cause. Then she wails until someone comes to comfort her."

After presenting the case, Dr. Ruskin asked his students how they would like caring for this person. Most of them said they would not like it at all. He then said that he believed he would especially enjoy it and thought that they might, also. He passed a picture of the patient around for his puzzled students to see. It was his six-month-old daughter!

Most of the students had already made up their minds that they would not like caring for such a patient. But the age of the patient, rather than the actual duties, made the task seem fun and enjoyable! When they thought the task might be fun, they were positive about it, though their reaction just moments before was quite negative.

There is nothing in life that will bring a good feeling into your life like giving to

another. It's worth it to sometimes stick out your neck for another. But there is an important principle that we must recognize. Before we are able to give love we must receive love. Let me give you a powerful example. Once years ago there was a little girl in an institution who was almost like a wild beast. The workers at the institution had written her off as hopeless. An elderly nurse believed there was hope for the child, however. She felt she could communicate love and hope to this wild little creature. The nurse daily visited the child whom they called Little Annie, but for a long time Little Annie gave no indication she was aware of her presence. The elderly nurse persisted and repeatedly brought some cookies and left them in her room. Soon the doctors in the institution noticed a change. After a period of time, they moved Little Annie upstairs. Finally the day came when this seemingly "hopeless case" was released. Filled with compassion for others because of her institution experience, Little Annie, Anne Sullivan, wanted to help others.

It was Anne Sullivan who, in turn, played the crucial role in the life of Helen Keller. It was she who saw the great potential in this little blind, deaf and rebellious child. She loved her, disciplined her, played, prayed, pushed, and worked with her until Helen Keller became an inspiration to the entire world. It began with the elderly nurse, then Anne Sullivan, then Helen Keller, and finally every person who has ever been influenced by the example of Helen Keller. That chain of love goes on forever.

So we end the sermon back where we began. *"I feel it in my fingers, I feel it in my toes. Love is all around me, and so the feeling grows. It's written on the wind, it's everywhere I go. So if you really love God, come on and let it show."*

Amen.