Sunday, June 1, 1986
THE TENACITY OF GOD'S LOVE
I John 4:7-12,18-21

Here's a true story uncovered by Bob Greene, a newspaper columnist. The date is sometime in 1982.

Ira is 29 and lives with his parents. He has never spoken a word. When he was born on September 12, 1953, he seemed to be a normal baby. After a few months, though, his mother and father began to worry. Ira seemed unable to hold up his head properly. His parents took Ira to a number of doctors. When the baby was eighteen months old, the diagnosis seemed certain. Ira was suffering from severe brain damage. The physicians warned that he would probably never be able to function as anything but an infant.

The parents are middle-class Jewish people; they live on Chicago's far North Side. They made a determination early on: they would not put Ira in an institution. If he remained a baby forever, so be it. He was theirs, and he would live with them.

Now he is 29. When friends call his parents' home, they hear an almost constant low, rumbling sound in the background. The sound is made by Ira. Because of the problem in his mind, he cannot help himself from making the noise; it fills the house all day, every day.

He must be watched constantly; he is in danger of hurting himself by damaging his head with his fists. His mother, who is 52, bathes him and helps him go to the bathroom. His father shaves him. Ira seldom goes outside. In addition to brain damage, he developed curvature of the spine when he was a teenager, and because of this, he is forced into a stooped position. He feels pain when he walks. Sometimes his mother will take him into the backyard, but that is about all.

He has never been to a barbershop, never to a dentist. Friends of his parents who work in those fields visit the house. Other old friends, though, don't visit the way they used to. When Ira was small, they seemed to be able to deal with his handicaps better than they do now.

"It's hard to blame those people," Ira's mother says. "When their children were growing up, they could identify with what we were going through with Ira, because Ira was a child like their girls and boys. But their children went to school, graduated, went to college, and got married. Ira remained a child, and they don't know how to respond to that."

Ira's parents do not know how much he is aware of them. He is their son, though, and they do what they can to make his life more serene. They play music for him — classical works and operas. The music seems to soothe Ira. He will kneel by the record player and appear to be content.

At night, Ira will become restless. His mother has not slept through until the morning since Ira was born. She will hear him in his room, and she will go to him, turn him over, and cover him with blankets. She will stay with him until he has fallen back asleep.

She does not think about what might have been. "I made the decision a long time ago," she says. "He is with us, and that's the way it will be. Certainly, our life is not like most people's. We can't really go out, and it's awkward to invite people in.

“But that’s all right. Ira has given my life a purpose. He has taught me about love. By trying to give him a good life, I feel there’s a reason for me to be on Earth. When you think about it, what am I giving up? I don’t go to the movies, and I don’t go out to see people as much as I might. But isn’t that all sort of minor compared with providing a life for my son?”

Once each year, on a Jewish holiday, Ira’s parents take him to their synagogue. It is a holiday filled with songs, so they do not have to worry about his noises bothering the other worshippers. The mother and the father sit on either side of Ira, each of them holding one of his hands, so he does not start hurting himself.

The rest of the time, though, they are at home together. Once in a while, his mother will wonder about whether he truly knows who he is. Twenty-nine years have passed without any definite sign. “I do think he knows that he is loved,” she says. “I can’t guarantee much beyond that. There’s no definite way that he responds to me. It’s just a sense I have that he knows.

“Sometimes he will look at me straight in the face. He will look me in the eye, and I will think that it’s a sign of recognition. Maybe I’m fooling myself, though.”

She has one great fear. She has lived all these years with him in the house. She wonders what would happen to Ira if she and her husband were to die before Ira did.

“My hope for him is that his parents will be alive all of his lifetime to take care of him,” she says. “I don’t know what else to do but to hope, because if I think too much about it, it makes me too uncomfortable.”

She is resolved to the life she has chosen. Her days begin and end with Ira. She has learned to limit the things she yearns for. But she does allow herself to have one dream. “I know it will never happen,” she says, “but I would give almost anything to hear him talk before I’m gone. Not a sentence or anything. I know that will never happen. But if he would say a word one day… I know it sounds selfish. I think about what it would be like if I was sitting with him one day and he looked at me and said, ‘Mama.’”

The tenacity of a mother and father’s love for their child suggests to me more powerfully than anything that God’s love for all of us and for the creation itself is like those parents’ love and care for Ira. God’s love, like theirs, never lets go!

As our scripture reading this morning from the First Letter of John in the New Testament reminds us, those who love like Ira’s parents are living out the love of God at its deepest level: “Beloved, let us love one another; for love is of God, and those who love are born of God and know God. God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God and God abides in them.”

Furthermore, as I thought about the story of Ira and his parents, it seemed to me that it is an almost perfect parable to illustrate the tenacity of God’s love for us and for all people. Here are some ingredients of that love.

First of all, God’s love has the patience, the long-suffering, illustrated by the story. Just as Ira’s parents were infinitely patient with him, so is God patient with us. And we, in turn, are called to be patient with others. That’s the way God’s love is spread in this world.

Someone said, “Love is an uncommon power to cope with common suffering. Suffering itself takes no talent.” We all suffer, and we watch and suffer with others — what we need is the power to cope with it. The source of this power is God’s divine love.

Secondly, the tenacity of God’s love includes kindness. When I think of the kindness which Ira’s parents displayed toward him day after day, year after year, with no hint that he even knew they were being kind, it reminded me of God’s kindness towards us. Love is a power that moves us to be kind.
What is kindness? It is the will to save; it is God’s awesome power channeled into gentle healing. Kindness is love acting on persons. Such kindness may be soft; it is not weak; tender, but not feeble; sensitive, but not fragile.

Our world has difficulty understanding that love is power, and that kindness is the work of that power. It is said that the German philosopher Nietzsche hated Christianity for encouraging kindness. He accused Christian love of draining strong people by making them kind, driving them to waste their energies on lepers, cripples, and oppressed people. He would not have liked the kindness of Ira’s parents. Nietzsche thought that if we could rid the world of faith in Christ, and thus of love, we might again produce supermen. The strong could get stronger and the weak die out.

But far from weakness, the kindness of love is enormous strength — more power than most of us have except now and then. Kindness is the power that moves us to support and heal someone who offers nothing in return. Ira could offer nothing in return.

It does not take much power to write a small check for charity. It takes great power to personally reach out and help the weak. It takes tremendous power to be a Mother Teresa, wrapping tender arms around the wretched poor and bleeding sick in the streets of Calcutta, or in any place in the world. I marvel at the power of Ira’s parents. And I marvel even more at the kindness of God. It is part of the tenacity of God’s love.

Thirdly, the tenacity of God’s love means that it bears or carries all things. Everything in creation that is good rests on the power of love. I believe that love is at the center of creation — it is what calls creation into being and what keeps creating the ever new. I believe that God’s love and ours, which comes from God, has a cosmic quality to it. Love holds all things together, carries them along, keeps them moving, and sustains them. It is the basic energy of creation. Love is the amazing power that makes the world go around and human history move ahead. Love is the power that sustains the universe itself. It is the invisible foundation for all the structures of life.
For us on a personal level, it means the power of love helps us to bear the burdens that come our way. Again, in the story, Ira’s parents were able to bear the burden of caring for him all those years because of the power of love.

It is the same tenacity of love which bears all things that gives us the power to not step in at times when someone needs to do something on his or her own for their own growth or development. All parents know how difficult it is to sometimes watch the child struggle, and yet we know in our love that the best way to help them is to not help them.

I have a colleague in the ministry who was born without any arms at all. His name is Harold Wilke. Because of his parents’ tenacious love, he grew up and is able to live his life as you and I live ours.

He tells this story: “I was 2 or 3 years old, sitting on the floor of my bedroom of our home, trying to get a shirt over my head and around my shoulders and having an extraordinarily difficult time. I was grunting and sweating, and my mother just stood there and watched. Obviously, looking back on this from hearing about it a long time later, I realized that her arms must have been held rigidly at her side. Every instinct in her wanted to reach out and do it for me, as she kept those arms tight at her side. Finally, her neighbor, a woman friend, turned to her and said in exasperation, ‘Ida, why don’t you help that child?’ My mother responded through gritted teeth, ‘I am helping him.’”

God’s love, like ours, bears all things, even watching the struggles of ourselves and others, knowing that sometimes to step in is not to be helpful and loving. So God lets us struggle and sweat until we learn to do what needs to be done.

In the fourth place, the tenacity of God’s love includes hope. St. Paul wrote that “Love hopes all things.”
Ira’s parents once desired and expected that something could be done to help their child. Gradually, they lost their expectation, but kept the desire. Then as they experienced God’s love for them, they discovered that they could give their full unconditional love to their retarded child. Gradually they let go of their heart’s demand that he be different from what he is. They accepted Ira as he is.

Yet they still have hope, hope that they will outlive him so that he will be cared for, and hope even that one day he might say one word, “Mama.”

That’s God’s hope for all of us too, that we will recognize God for what God is — our Creator, and the love that saves us all. Amen.