Sunday, September 25, 1988
GOD AS LOVER (No. 2 in a Series: The Statement of Faith)
I John 4:7-12,19-21; John 3:16-17

What is the Christian religion? How would you define the Christian faith? What is it all about? These questions elicit all kinds of answers. “The Christian faith is following the Ten Commandments,” says one person. “It’s obeying the Golden Rule,” says another. “It’s belonging to the church,” says still another. And there are many more answers, some partly true, others far removed. The point is, for many people, the Christian faith is often thought of in terms of our having to do something — obeying rules, commandments, or fulfilling requirements.

But the Christian faith is first and foremost, and essentially, a distinctive message and belief about God. It is not primarily a new ethic. It is not, in the main, a philosophy of life or a social or political program. To be sure, all these things issue from it — it involves an ethic, supplies a philosophy, proclaims forgiveness for all people — but at the foundation, at the center, it is a message about God, about what God has done, what God is doing, and what God will continue to do. Thus, the Statement of Faith we are considering in this sermon series is God-centered.

Last Sunday, in the first sermon in this series, we looked at God’s activity as the creator, and we considered some new and additional metaphors and adjectives for talking about God. One of the traditional metaphors is to think of God as a loving father, but it is equally appropriate to think of God as a loving mother, God as lover, and God as friend.

Today, we come to the very center of the message about God that the Christian faith proclaims — the Statement of Faith puts it this way: “In Jesus Christ, the man of Nazareth, our crucified and risen Lord, God has come to us and shared our common lot, conquering sin and death and reconciling the whole creation to its Creator.”

To say that God has come to us in Jesus is a concrete and personal way of speaking about God as lover. If there is one word the Christian tradition has been willing to apply unqualifiedly to God, it is “love.” God exemplifies love; God is the model of love. We learn what love is by looking to God, not to ourselves. God loves not only us but the whole creation. The Gospel of John puts it succinctly: “God so loved the world that God came to us in Jesus — in a human being.”

Thus, we learn most about God as lover by looking at the story of Jesus of Nazareth, his teachings, death, and resurrection. In a little country we now call Israel, about 2,000 years ago, Jesus was born into a Jewish family. He grew up in the small town of Nazareth, was educated in the local synagogue in the Jewish religious tradition, and for the greater part of his life was a working carpenter in the same town.

He wrote no books. His friends were mostly common people, fishermen, peasants, and the outcasts of society. When, at about age 30, he began his public ministry as an itinerant teacher, his own family tried to dissuade him. The theologians, priests, religious leaders, and clever people were not impressed by him.

Soon, he began to gather a small group of disciples who walked about the countryside with him. At first, the crowds gathered inquisitively to listen to his teaching, and many came to be

healed of their diseases. His teaching, his vocabulary, his rhetoric, his style were solidly in the Jewish tradition.

As he went about his ministry, he began to gather enemies as well as followers. He frequently talked about human problems and human relationships and interpreted these in the light of his religious heritage and tradition. However, Jesus' understanding of God and his interpretation of the religious tradition appeared to be at odds with the establishment. He was, in the best sense of the term, a religious revolutionary in that he offered a profound challenge to the way human beings lived their lives, practiced their religion, and organized their societies. He was also a mystic visionary who taught that God is near us all the time — this day, this minute — in loving intimacy.

Jesus was an extraordinarily warm, sensitive, and charming human being. The gentleness, wisdom, and poetic insight of the traditions that can be traced directly to him are impressive and appealing, even to those who reject all the developments in Christianity since the time of Jesus.

However, he was too much for his own contemporaries. He was arrested, tried, and executed as a threat to society. He was nailed to a cross between two criminals and buried in a borrowed tomb, and that should have been the end of that. An itinerant Galilean rabbi with a ragtag band of followers, living in the midst of immense religious ferment on the fringes of the Roman Empire — hardly worth noticing. The stone was rolled across the entrance to the tomb, and he ought to have been promptly forgotten.

But he wasn't. For something strange happened. It was rumored that death had not finished him. It was reported that he had been seen alive. And then, quite suddenly, the same disciples who had deserted him appeared in the streets proclaiming that he had risen. They said he had come back to them. They now had his power. Instead of being in one place, he was now everywhere.

Was it surprising that the world, hearing that, tried to laugh it to scorn? But the story continued to circulate, and his followers continued to tell others about this love of God that had come among them, and the extraordinary thing is that neither the laughter nor the force of the Roman Empire, nor anything else, could stop the message of Jesus. The persistence of Jesus in life was a validation of his message. God is a lover of this world and of each one of us in it.

It's an astounding claim. God has come to us and is with us in every aspect of life and death. The Statement of Faith puts it this way: "God has come to us and shared our common lot." To say that Jesus shared our common lot is to say that Jesus was fully human, even as we are. He was first a baby, then a little child, and he grew up to be an adult. He knew weariness, hunger, thirst, anger, joy, temptation, suffering, sadness, and even death. In this way, God as lover shares our common lot.

To say that God has come to us in Jesus and shared our common lot is also to say that God identifies totally with creation and with us human beings.

Perhaps you've experienced what it means to you as an individual when another person identifies with you and is totally present. The person identifying with you gives you the impression that he or she is not better than you in any way but stands beside you — not above you or below you.

The story is told about a minister who was seeking out a newcomer in town who worked in the Round House at the Baltimore and Ohio Railroad Yards. When the minister finally located the man, he found him repairing an engine. “Sorry, I can’t shake hands with you, Pastor,” the man said, holding up hands black with dirt and engine grease. Impulsively, the minister stooped over and rubbed his hands in the dirt that lay on the floor. “Now there’s no difference between us,” he said. “You see, sir, I want to shake your hand.” That man was the minister’s friend for life.

It has been said that the one characteristic those whom we call saints have in common is identification. Through some mysterious process, only dimly perceived by the rest of us, they are able to identify — to feel at one — with the full range of creation. They identify with the leper and the criminal; with the disfigured and the outcast; with the thief and the alien; with the coward and the heretic; with the beast in the field and the bird in the air and the fish in the sea. They comprehend the connectedness of all creation.

This is the kind of person Jesus was. He could identify with Zacchaeus, the prostitute, the mentally ill, the little child, and the old person. He could move among the poor, the uneducated, the afflicted, and the outcasts as well as the healthy and the rich. And the message of Jesus is that God identifies with all of us in the same way. God as lover has come to us and shared our common lot.

God as lover, as experienced in Jesus, is also the example of our loving. According to the Bible, God loves the world totally and passionately. God as lover is the moving power of love in the universe. Through this kind of love, God, through Jesus, as the Statement of Faith puts it, conquers sin and death and reconciles the whole creation to the Creator. Love can do that! God loves and saves the world because it is valuable.

Now, what does this metaphor of God as lover have to say about our loving of the world and our loving one another?

We all know that in a love relationship between human beings, betrayal and estrangement can turn feelings of attraction into anger. Great love engenders strong emotions at both extremes. The more we love an individual, the more angry we become when something betrays that love.

At such times, however, the will to love, commitment to the other, continues because, even though estranged, the beloved is still valuable. One of the characteristics of genuine love is that it endures; it is faithful through all manner of barriers and difficulties, finding the beloved valuable even when others may not see value or may not see it any longer.

The great lovers are the ones who, no matter what, continue to find the beloved valuable beyond all reasons that can be given. It is important to distinguish this kind of valuation from love that continues “in spite of.” In other words, there is a difference between the kind of love that continues despite the fact that the other is worthless, sinful, or whatever, and the kind of love that God models for us, which persists because the other is, given whatever negative qualities, still worthy and desirable. To be sure, we human beings cannot, in some circumstances, attain this ideal.

But as a model for God’s love to us, as seen and experienced in Jesus, and hence our love to others in our time, which is better? Is it better, as has been usual in the tradition, to love others in spite of their worthlessness (recall the old adage, “Hate the sin, but love the sinner") or because of their value? Do we want to be loved in spite of who we are or because of who we

are? Would you rather be told by someone who loves you, “I love you in spite of the fact that you are a worthless, no-good bum,” or, “I love you because you are a child of God and therefore of value to God and to me"?

God as lover values the world and all its creatures so passionately and totally that God enters into the beloved, becoming one with them. As God did in Jesus, God also invites us to become lovers of the world and healers of its wounds.

In this model of God as lover, salvation is not something received so much as it is something performed; it is not something that happens to us so much as something we participate in. In this model of salvation, it is not sufficient to be loved; it is necessary also to love. We are made whole only as we participate in the process of making whole. We participate then in our own salvation as well as the salvation of others. I can think of no better illustration of this than what happens in A.A. in the 12th step. The alcoholics, having admitted that they were powerless over alcohol and having gone through the first eleven steps of A.A., then resolve in the 12th step: “Having had a spiritual awakening as the result of these steps, we tried to carry this message to alcoholics and to practice these principles in all our affairs.” It is in helping others that we are helped.

When we participate with God as lover, especially as seen in Jesus of Nazareth, then we also take part with God in reconciling the whole creation to its Creator.

What does this mean for us here and now? It means that God as lover, coming into the world in Jesus, is more than an example or ideal, although it is that also. It means that the power of God’s love is at work in the world and throughout all creation, and it is a saving and healing power.

It means in a personal way that when you are lonely and depressed, God is there with you, right down in the depths. And when you are joyous, God is there too. Problems will still arise; temptations will come. We still have to work each day; our loved ones will die, and so will we. But in all of this, God is with us, and God’s love is at work redeeming us and all of creation. “In Jesus Christ, the man of Nazareth, our crucified and risen Lord, God has come to us and shared our common lot, conquering sin and death and reconciling the whole creation to its creator.” Amen.

Let us now join together in saying the Statement of Faith.