

The Golden Triangle

Reverend Dr. James A. Forbes Jr.

I am in need of the experience of love, of receiving love. Therefore I would like to approach the time I have before you as a kind of experience in love, so that we can, for a while, talk about love: what it is; what restrains it; what may perhaps help to retrain it; and what its implications might be personally, in family, in community, in institutions, and in our nation. So, please: I've had a difficult week, and I am in the mood for love.

First, I've just written a song that I will eventually have members of my children's choir sing. I think it speaks a little bit about love. It says:

I made heaven so happy today,
Receiving God's love and giving it away.
When I looked up, heaven smiled at me,
Now I'm so happy, can't you see?
I'm happy, I'm happy, I'm happy, I'm happy.
Sharing makes me happy, makes heaven happy,
too.
I'm happy, I'm happy, I'm happy.
Let me share my special happy smile with you.

I think that love is, in a sense, about a golden triangle. It is about receiving that which comes from the heights, or from the dimension of depth. It is about sending forth and sharing that which we have received, and connecting that triangle and balancing it, in a fairly continuous manner.

Love is about receiving and giving. I'd like to thank Peggy Shriver for helping me with these words, around about Advent time,

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when she helped to correct the rhythm:

I'm a novice when it comes to receiving;
Giving has become my expertise.
But giving alone, without getting,
Becomes soon a fatal disease.

If the intake valve is not opened,
There's no way to maintain a supply.
There comes a point in the cycle of life
When the outgoing stream runs dry.

Straining out love from a vacuum
Is like drinking from the heart of a stone;
Try as we may, at the end of the day,
We're exhausted, frustrated, alone.

"Better to give than receive," we've been taught,
But another truth I've learned just by living:
Only the soul with the grace to receive,
Excels in the fine art of giving.

While I'm talking about giving, I want to offer you something that I have received as a gift of love. I received it during a celebration of ten years of ministry at the Riverside Church. The committee agreed that they'd call me up, they'd call my wife up, too, and they'd have one of the singers of the church serenade the congregation, but in my honor. Since I want to love you too, and because I want your love, I ought to share something, rather than just talk about it. I've asked Diana Solomon-Glover to come and to make love to this congregation as it reflects on the source of love that I'm ultimately going to be talking about. [Lyrics to "I Don't Feel No Ways Tired," sung by Diana Solomon-Glover:]

I am seeking for a city, hallelujah,
I am seeking for a city, hallelujah,
A city into the kingdom, hallelujah,
A city into the kingdom, hallelujah.

I don't feel no ways tired;
I've come too far from where I started from.

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Nobody told me the road would be easy.
I can't believe He brought me this far, to leave
me.

There's a better day a-comin', hallelujah,
There's a better day a-comin', hallelujah,
When I leave this world of sorrow, hallelujah,
For to join the holy number, hallelujah.

I don't feel no ways tired;
I come too far from where I started from.
Nobody told me the road would be easy.
I can't believe He brought me this far, to leave
me.

I don't feel no ways tired.
Shout glory, hallelujah,
I hope to shout glory when this world is on fire,
Glory, glory, hallelujah.

I don't believe He brought me this far;
I can't believe He brought me this far;
I won't believe He brought me this far,
To leave me.¹

Where did this thing get started, this steadfast love of God that has not brought us this far, then to leave us? James Weldon Johnson, in "God's Trombones," tells us how it got started:

And God stepped out on space,
And he looked around and said:
I'm lonely—
I'll make me a world.

As far as the eye of God could see
Darkness covered everything,
Blacker than a hundred midnights
Down in a cypress swamp.

Then God smiled,

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And the light broke,
And the darkness rolled up on one side,
And the light stood shining on the other,
And God said: That's good!

Then God reached out and took the light in his
hands
And God rolled the light around in his hands
Until he made the sun;
And he set the sun a-blazing in the heavens.
And the light that was left from making the sun
God gathered it up in a shining ball
And flung it against the darkness,
Spangling the night with moon and stars.
Then down between
The darkness and the light
He hurled the world;
And God said: That's good!

Then God himself stepped down—
And the sun was on his right hand,
And the moon was on his left;
The stars were clustered about his head,
And the earth was under his feet.
And God walked, and where he trod
His footsteps hollowed the valleys out
And bulged the mountains up.

Then he stopped and looked and saw
That the earth was hot and barren.
So God stepped over to the edge of the world
And he spat out the seven seas—
He batted his eyes, and the lightnings flashed—
He clapped his hands, and the thunders
rolled—
And the waters above the earth came down,
The cooling waters came down.

Then the green grass sprouted,
And the little red flowers blossomed,
The pine tree pointed his finger to the sky,

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And the oak spread out his arms,
The lakes cuddled down in the hollow of the
ground,
And the rivers ran down to the sea;
And God smiled again,
And the rainbow appeared,
And curled itself around his shoulder.

Then God raised his arms and he waved his
hand
Over the sea and over the land,
And he said: Bring forth! Bring forth!
And quicker than God could drop his hand,
Fishes and fowls
And beasts and birds
Swam the rivers and the seas,
Roamed the forests and the woods,
And split the air with their wings.
And God said: That's good!

Then God walked around,
And God looked around
On all that he had made.
He looked at his sun,
And he looked at his moon,
And he looked at his little stars;
He looked on his world
With all its living things,
And God said: I'm lonely still.

Then God sat down—
On the side of a hill where he could think;
By a deep, wide river he sat down;
With his head in his hands,
God thought and thought,
Till he thought: I'll make me a man!

Up from the bed of the river
God scooped the clay;
And by the bank of the river
He kneeled him down;

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And there the great God Almighty
Who lit the sun and fixed it in the sky,
Who flung the stars to the most far corner of
the night,
Who rounded the earth in the middle of his
hand;
This great God,
Like a mammy bending over her baby,
Kneeled down in the dust
Toiling over a lump of clay
Till he shaped it in his own image;

Then into it he blew the breath of life,
And man became a living soul.
Amen. Amen.²

So James Weldon Johnson at least suggests where it all started.

Because I am a Protestant minister within the Christian faith, the invitation to talk about love and its obstacles begins to meddle in my vocation. Come to think of it, that has been the principle problematic of my vocation—a job based on the conviction that out of love, God created the heavens and the earth, and then, loving the creation yet not able to experience quite the vis-à-vis, shaped us in his image, so that correspondence and a certain kind of I-Thou dynamic could be experienced. My job has been elaboration on the theme of the relationship between the God of Love and a creation crowned by our experience as a part of that creation, where a glorious love triangle is the fundamental structure of reality itself: God loving the creation, with our having a chance to view it in quite a different way. The relationship between us, who are of the creation, and God, and between us and the rest of creation, represents the structure of reality. I call this the golden triangle of love: the creator, the creation, the relationship between the creator and the creatures, and the relationship between the creatures one with the other.

For forty-six years, I have been engaged in trying to answer the question: If it was made like that, what got in the way? Why do we live with such inhumanity toward each other? I do not need to expound very far on this. Let me just say that there are certain things that have gotten in the way of this dynamic, fluid flow of love within the golden love triangle. Several people have contributed to

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my sense about this. Perhaps more than anyone else, Reinhold Niebuhr, in *Moral Man and Immoral Society*, has given the wisdom that Rabbi Steinsaltz was speaking to us about today. In that book, Reinhold Niebuhr gives me my first clue. Although we often think of Niebuhr in terms of his writings about the obstruction to love called pride, in *Moral Man and Immoral Society* he says that the obstacle that has mattered most, that is even more fundamental than pride, is our unwillingness to accept the security that God offers. That, Niebuhr says, is fundamental.

Built into the love triangle is a tension between that which we experience from the creator as infinite, and our own finitude; and, in regard to ourselves in relationship to the rest of the creation, our wondering whether there is plenitude. This problematic of plenitude and finitude introduces the sense that one who has been gifted needs to protect the gift that has been given. Reinhold Niebuhr suggests that inasmuch as we cannot accept or trust the security that God gives us, then rather than enjoying the flow through the golden triangle of love, we set about to build our defenses, to protect ourselves from those who would, as it were, rob us of the gift itself.

Well, if this is a problem between us, I need to suggest that it is also God's problem. Let me explain this business of whether you can really trust folks to function right in the context of this golden love triangle. The English poet George Herbert, in his poem "The Pulley," which I learned under Douglas Steere while he taught at Union Theological Seminary, suggests that even God is not always sure that things will work out in the golden triangle of love. George Herbert says:

When God at first made Man,
Having a glasse of blessings standing by,
Let us (said he) poure on him all we can.
Let the world's riches, which dispersed lie,
Contract into a span.

So strength first made a way,
Then beautie flow'd, then wisdome, honour, pleasure.
When almost all was out, God made a stay,
Perceiving that alone of all His treasure

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Rest in the bottom lay.

For if I should (said he)
Bestow this jewel also on my creature,
He would adore my gifts instead of me,
And rest in Nature, not the God of Nature.
So both should losers be.

Yet let him keep the rest,
But keep them with repining restlessnesse.
Let him be rich and wearie, that at least,
If goodness leade him not, yet wearinesse
May tesse him to my breast.³

The problem is that in this triangle, maintaining the appropriate harmony or the appropriate balance from legitimate centers of consciousness, of being, and of agency, we spend our time trying to figure out, “How can I get my share? How can I maintain the balance that belongs to me? How can I risk giving if, as I give, I am depleted?” Much of the obstacle to love is the defense mechanisms we employ to better ensure the sense of satiety within our own being—to the neglect, often, of our neighbors’ being, and to the neglect, even, of the being of God.

I think Eric Erickson was right, especially in defining for religionists that the first stage of development is the establishing of trust. For if there is no sense that I can trust that at the end of the day there will be enough for me, then love becomes the torturous experience of trying to grasp for that which cannot be grasped, but can only be received—as a butterfly wing that flits and touches the cheek and flies on. That, it seems to me, is the problematic I’ve been working on all my ministerial life. How do you get folks to believe that the God who made us and gave us the gift of life is faithful, and did not bring us this far, to leave us? How do I get myself so to trust in the adequacy of the providential steadfastness of God as to be willing to risk offering to the Other that which I have received? “I made heaven so happy today, /Receiving God’s love and giving it away,” because guess what? There’s more where that came from;

there is enough.

Especially as a Christian minister, I understand that the issue at the heart of the Christian faith is an answer to the question, "Will there be enough?" I understand that the answer of the founder of my tradition, Jesus, is, "Yes, there will be enough; I have come to show you there's enough." In fact, that's the meaning of the wedding feast at Cana of Galilee, when the wine ran out. That story is the biblical way of establishing what the problematic of love is. Folks are scared it's going to run out, that they are not going to get their share. And for that reason, the making of wine out of water—so that there was enough flowing to make them all drunk—was at least one way the gospel says, "Look, folks, the design is such that there *is* enough." (Of course there are those who suggest that the disciplines had hit that party and consumed more than their share, making it a problem that has to be dealt with—how do you distribute adequately?) Then there is also the story of the feeding of the five thousand, another miracle: there is enough. Or the healing of the sick, at the home of Peter's wife's mother: there is enough.

The obstacle to love is that we are afraid to trust the security that God offers. Somebody may be asking, "Well, what is the nature of the security that God offers?" And in the light of today's assignment, I have come to the first answer I have been aware of. The security God offers is love. It is not, "You're never going to have a problem." Nobody told you that the way would be easy. The security God offers is not that. Will those who are virtuous always discover that bad things happen only to bad people? No. God offers love—love, meaning what? That I am with you and for you forever, beyond consideration of your virtues or your vices, and that I wish union with you under the condition of your freedom. That is all. But the question is, is that enough? If we could believe it, it probably would be much closer to enough than our present arrangement based on our defense mechanisms, which we use because we cannot trust the love of the Holy One to be sufficient for our needs.

For some forty years now, I've been wondering: What can I say about the obstacles to love? First of all I can say more about what they are. The obstacle to love is God's sending the love and then my hoarding the love—except that God's love is like manna in the wilderness. If you gather too much on the day before the Sabbath, by the day after the Sabbath it will stink, because you could not trust that there would be more. When that happens we have reached a point of contamination in the love triangle, an imbalance.

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Reinhold Niebuhr says that we human beings have this problem, that out of all God's wonderful gifts, of which George Herbert spoke, we have the tendency to take one of the vitalities of life and enthrone it, giving it ultimate significance. He considers that vitality to be *sensuality*. We often think sensuality is about sex, but it can be about food, or about material well-being, or about the hedonisms of the day. It can be about any one of the wonderful and beautiful vitalities that God set in delicate balance but that we elevate, because it is so wonderful, so that everything else is relegated to it—whether it is sex or food or even illusions of the mind, or, in its psychotic dimension, a world that I have created and insist that everyone else live in, no matter how detached from the reality of the love triangle it may be. Sensuality is impasse, it is imbalance, it is interruption of the flow, it is fear—all wrapped together, serving as obstacles to that wonderful flow that is life under optimal circumstances.

Well, what are the social implications? If, having received the gift of sexual vitality, I elevate the form, the nature, and the expression of my love to the critique and negation of the God-giveness of other forms of love, I may be creating an obstacle in the flow. If my level of consuming gets to be significant enough—if I imagine that God sent the flow of material subsistence necessities without binding, so that I take unto myself as an individual so large a share of the resources of the earth that I make it impossible for others to have their basic subsistence necessities—that becomes an obstacle to the flow of love. Or if I think the protection of my turf justifies blasting to smithereens others who are in cultures that may in a sense be stopping the flow, not simply of oil but of other influences; or I insist that because I am who I am, my needs justify expropriating unto myself that which belonged to God and was to be shared with others—then love gets messed up. Or if I allow my race, my class, my ideology, my religion, my outlook on the world to be backed up by love for the self that gets constricted within the parameters of selfhood alone, I keep messing up the thing called love.

So here's what I've been doing for the last forty-some years: I've been trying to find out what helps to overcome the impasses, the imbalance, the interruption of the flow—the sensuality, the fear, the greed, the war-making proclivities, the defense mechanisms that restrict the flow of life. And here's what I've found.

Reinhold Niebuhr once again helps us out, but his friend Paul

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Tillich also spoke about these issues, in the book *The Courage to Be*. To love freely and let the flow go, so that I can receive love from God and give it away—that acceptance is important, acceptance of the limitations of life, acceptance that it's not a perfect arena, acceptance that we live and we die, in fact we even feed upon the rest of the order of creation, and the earth will get its share as well. We have to accept the nature of the terrain. The triangle of love was not placed in some midair of perfection; it was placed on something less than ultimate, a penultimate platform of being, for us who live this life. And so we have to accept. Today I died; tomorrow I'll live again. Today I was diminished; tomorrow I will be expanded. Today I was *really* diminished; I will discover the miniaturization of grace even in the diminished state. And yet the life in me reaches out to break beyond the confinements. Life is a mixture of all of this. To be able to let love flow again we have to accept it.

We also have to practice trust. We have to start at trusting ourselves to do what we say we will do. We have to trust in our significant others, discovering that it's not going to be perfect with ourselves or with the significant other. Let us be aware that in this thing called life, if love is to flow, forgiveness opens up the way again—often without even asking questions as to who clogged the sink. Forgiveness *plunges*, lets it flow again, until it stops up again, and then flows again.

Also what helps is experiencing the exhilaration of being in genuine community. Yesterday I was with Millard Fuller, the founder of Habitat for Humanity, who is getting ready to build houses everywhere, all over the world. He talked about folks who do not love each other, like a right-wing religious leader and a left-leaning radical libertarian. And when he puts them together to work, instead of arguing they have discovered that sometimes beneath the level of their defense mechanisms, working together reveals a humanity that is like to that divine. That helps, too; and discovering together and commiserating together about the disconnection that diminishes the flow, and telling each other, "We're going to do something about it."

Well, how shall I close my talk? I guess the best way is the way I started, with another little song, also for children. Whether we call love *agape*, or whether we call it childlike trust, or the naturalness of giving (even children have their selfish moments), I think at the end of the day, love is about recovering the awareness of what family is about. I am not speaking of "family values," nor family as

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defined by myself, my wife, and our son, nor even your family, nor the family of nationality, nor the family of ethnicity, nor the family of religion—but being able to see *FAMILY* writ in upper case, which may help us to experience what love is like when it rises above or breaks through against the obstacles. So this is the way I close:

When the world was young
And the time had come
For children to laugh and play,
A plan was made to welcome them
And to guide them day by day.

Each child will have a family
For safe and tender care.
The family will be the place
Where children learn to share.

My family, your family,
Our families together,
Let us share.
We'll make this world a happy place
For children everywhere.

All around the world there are families,
We call them by different names.
We differ in the clothes we wear,
In our food, our words, our games.

Yet we are one in many ways,
Beginning with our birth.
We are a great big family,
All children of the earth.

When we all join hands as a family
A beauty and strength is there,
To build a home where everyone
Is thoughtful, kind, and fair.

There is no place in all the world
More comforting than this,
A family where each child finds

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A smile, a hug, a kiss.

And so, God love you.

Notes

1. "I Don't Get No Ways Tired" by Curtiss Burrell, in J. Jefferson Cleveland and Verolga Nix, eds., *Songs of Zion* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1981).
2. James Weldon Johnson, "The Creation," in *God's Trombones: Seven Negro Sermons in Verse* (New York: The Viking Press, 1927), 17–20.
3. George Herbert, "The Pulley," in *The English Works of George Herbert*, ed. by George Herbert Palmer (Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1905), 3:149.