

May the Good Lord Take a Liking to You, Sermon July 26, 2026, by Rev. Sheldon Keller

Scripture Reading: John 1: 1-5 & Romans 8: 35-39

Anyway, I brought these books, magazines, and such because Pastor Day usually has something, right? He has a book to hand out, or a picture, or a map, or something to share. I just wanted them here; I am not going to use them; they are just here.

A little quiz: Who knows where the title of my sermon comes from? This will date you, I warn you. Nobody? My goodness! I know some of you are around my age. Some of you are older. A few of you are younger—not too many of you.

Roy Rogers. Remember that show? Yes, sure. Most times at the end of the show, that would be his farewell signature: “May the good Lord take a liking to you.”

Well, I thought it would show your age, but I guess you’re younger than I thought.

But speaking of age, George Burns is quoted as saying, “The secret of a good sermon is to have a good beginning and a good ending, then having the two as close together as possible.” I will pay no attention today to what he says.

“Taking a liking to you.” God loving us. How does God do that? And do we see it? Can we recognize it? Can we experience the ways in which God does do that? I think we can understand and see the ways that people do that, but how about God’s love? And you notice how dramatically Paul speaks about God’s love here in the Letter to the Romans.

What can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus? He says, “I am convinced that nothing”—nothing. He’s quite emphatic. He is assured. “I am convinced,” he says, “that neither death nor life, nor height, nor things present, nor things to come, nor principalities, nor rulers,” and so forth. And just in case he missed anything, after listing some things and some people, he said, “Nothing else in all creation.”

Do you notice that? “In all creation”—all-encompassing, all-inclusive.

“Convinced,” he says. Convinced. After all those shipwrecks, after all the imprisonments, after all the persecution, he is still convinced that he still feels God’s love. Or maybe it’s because of what he has gone through that he can make such an emphatic statement. Well, I don’t like to argue with the Apostle Paul, but I’d say, “Wait a minute. Are you sure? There’s nothing? Nothing?” And what does God’s love mean? How do we recognize it, feel it, see it?

Certainly, that is another way of asking: How does God care for us?

Well, maybe we might echo the words by Foreigner, the British rock band, back in 1984, where they have these lyrics in one of their songs: “I want to know what love is. I want you to show me. I want to feel what love is. I know you can show me.” Different context, of course. But think of that as a question being directed to God.

Well, Paul is not the first to talk about the extent of God’s love, God’s presence, God’s caring for His creation. Last Sunday, Berkeley read the Scriptures. Remember what he read? That’s okay. Berkeley probably doesn’t

either. But he read from Psalm 139 these words: “Where can I go to escape Your Spirit? Where can I flee from Your presence? If I ascend to the heavens, You are there. If I make my bed in Sheol, You are there. If I rise on the wings of the dawn, if I settle by the farthest sea, even there Your hand will guide me. Your right hand will hold me fast.”

Beautiful words. Beautiful words by the psalmist. But Paul’s words are even more dramatic. How can we be separated from the love of God, God’s presence, God’s caring? We can’t. No thing can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus.

But, my goodness, there are things that separate us from one another.

Let us lift up politics. Democrats and Republicans, separated in so many ways. Red Sox fans and Yankee fans. (We try not to let Yankee fans in here, but I know we have a couple.)

But you should have known what it was like when I preached and pastored in Connecticut. Mercy! A divided congregation. I happened to be there during the years that the Red Sox were doing quite well, however, so I felt good.

Protestants from Catholics were separated. Even today, we still can’t celebrate the Lord’s Supper together in a Catholic church. I remember years ago in Connecticut, I was invited to the installation of the Bishop of Norwich. So all the clergy were there. We were given special pews in which to sit, and we were also given a sheet specifically for us to remind us that we could not share in Communion. Still separated.

Maybe some of you are old enough—and I know you have to be—to remember that we were separated by cars. There were the Chevy family folks and the Ford family folks. (We didn’t bother with Chryslers or American Motors. Discounted those entirely.) But if you were a Chevy family, you always bought a Chevy. Or sometimes, like my father, he bought Pontiacs too. Same family, right? General Motors.

Separated.

I’ll never forget. At the time, I was running down the street, as was my wont, and a good friend of mine, my neighbor Wayne, came by in his Ford Falcon, all souped up. I could hear him coming.

Anyway, I’m running along doing my thing. He comes up beside me, follows me along, and we chatted briefly. Then he revved his engine and took off. About a quarter mile down the road, his car was stopped on the side. The driveshaft had fallen out.

I felt terrible about it.

Separated by so many things. So many things. We know what it is to be separated, and sometimes we even know why.

Generations are separated. They can’t talk the same language.

Racism. I went to a segregated school in Florida in the early ‘60s. I’ll never forget looking out in the field and watching about four or five young Black boys walking, minding their own business. All of a sudden, I saw some white boys run into the orchard, grab some oranges, and throw them at these young fellows. Totally unprovoked. Totally unprovoked.

Segregation. Racism. Separated by prejudice, distrust, and hatred.

Paul reminds us that nothing is to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Sometimes even our perception of the same event separates us from one another.

Comedian Steve Allen sent in the following story to *The Joyful Noise letter*, a periodical that goes to churches and provides humorous stories and cartoons. And I quote:

“During an ecumenical gathering, someone rushed in shouting, ‘The building is on fire!’ The Methodists at once gathered in a corner and prayed. The Baptists cried out, ‘Everyone into the water!’ The Lutherans posted a note on the door, declaring fire was evil because it was the abode of the devil. The Congregationalists yelled, ‘Every man for himself!’ Christian Scientists agreed among themselves there really was no fire. The Episcopalians formed a procession and marched out in good order. The Unitarian Universalists concluded that the fire had as much right to be there as anyone.”

Walls separate us. Neighbors have fences. Texas and Mexico. Palestinians and Israelis. Remember the Berlin Wall, the so-called Iron Curtain.

But what out there can separate us from God’s love? Nothing. But what is God’s love? How do we recognize it? We know what human love looks like. That we are sure of.

My father was a man of few words, but I think I’ve shared with you how he showed his love for the family, especially for my mother. My mother loved picture windows, and when he rebuilt our little cottage, he put in five picture windows. Five picture windows. My mother liked the color pink, so the house was gray and the trim was pink. The last time I looked at that house, maybe twenty years ago now, it still had those same colors. And we left there in 1960.

One of the most unusual weddings I ever conducted was my daughter’s. First of all, there was a problem with the unity candle. We couldn’t get it lit. They’ve been married over thirty years, so things worked out.

She dropped her ring, and the wedding was delayed—not because of the bride, not because of the groom—but because my son-in-law, out of love for his mother and respect for the promise he had made, insisted on keeping that promise. She had died when he was a young person, I think in his early teens if I remember correctly, and he had promised her that the place where she would have sat when he got married would instead have a bouquet of flowers. We held up the wedding maybe fifteen or thirty minutes—I forget—because that bouquet of flowers had been sent to the reception hall. They had to go get it and bring it back before we could proceed, because of my son-in-law’s love for his mother.

Well, how is God’s love made known, and what does God’s love mean here?

I think of the analogy of a parent. Analogies always have weaknesses, but I’m going to use it anyway. After all, in the Lord’s Prayer we refer to God as Father, and that’s not the only place.

Parents are not there to prevent bad things from happening, but to help pick up the pieces when things do go bad. They are there to give guidance, strength, wisdom, forgiveness, and comfort. They are called upon when help is needed.

Sounds a little bit like God to me.

For God's love is about compassion, caring for us all.

Remember that song, "Jesus Loves Me"? We all learned it as children, didn't we? One of the first songs we ever learned. Well, I have a new version of that, given to me by a member of the church in Carver where I served as interim. He got it from something written by Timothy Adkins. Evidently, a ninety-two-year-old preacher offered it to his congregation while preaching.

Well, let me remind you how the original song goes:

"Jesus loves me, this I know,
For the Bible tells me so.
Little ones to Him belong.
They are weak, but He is strong.
Yes, Jesus loves me.
Yes, Jesus loves me."

Well, here is the senior version:

"Jesus loves me, this I know,
Though my hair is white as snow.
Though my sight is growing dim,
Still He bids me trust in Him.

Though my steps are oh so slow,
With my hand in His I'll go.
On through life, come what may,
He'll be there to lead the way.

When the nights are dark and long,
In my heart He puts a song,
Telling me in words so clear,
'Have no fear, for I am near.'

When my work on earth is done,
And my victories have been won,
He will take me home above.
Then I'll understand His love.

I love Jesus. Does He know?
Have I ever told Him so?
Jesus loves to hear me say
That I love Him every day."

God's love. We were taught about it as children in many ways, including that song.

God's love, as a parent, says yes to some prayer petitions and no to others. Unanswered prayer—prayer in which the answer is no—it happens. My parents evidently loved me a lot because they wouldn't let me play

football in high school. They had good reason. The doctor strongly recommended that I not play because I had suffered a concussion and fractured skull as a young person.

Well, when I went to college a thousand miles from home, guess what I did? They took anybody with a pulse, so I played football in college—for a little while, anyway—until I went up against a 220-pound fullback in a tackling drill. I was a linebacker. To this day, I don't know if I got him, because he knocked me out.

Anyway, God shows His love in many ways to us. Among them is patience. Can you imagine God's patience with this world? I would have called it a day long ago. But God shows patience.

Jesus shows us the nature of God's love as He healed the sick, fed the hungry, offered forgiveness, showed kindness to all, and even while on the cross, you remember what He said: "Father, forgive them."

To me, God's love is seen in so many ways: the beauty of creation, full of color and diversity, and the fact that our world was created to provide all that we need.

I see God's love in the fact that He gave us free will. We're not puppets. We have been given the freedom to make mistakes. Sometimes I wish God hadn't given us quite so much freedom. And I see God's love being expressed in the opportunities that come our way.

I served the First Congregational Church of Hanover, New Hampshire, and one day I went to the church building, and lo and behold, there were goats at the door. We had to draw the line somewhere.

I got a call one Memorial Day from the treasurer of the church. He asked me if I could go into Boston with him and his wife to see a criminal defense lawyer. I said, "Okay." Another adventure.

Ever play donkey baseball? Anybody know what donkey baseball is? Someone from Maine, of course. You get tethered to a donkey and try to play baseball. Not easy.

One day in Connecticut, a man stopped by my office. I welcomed him to the church, and he looked at me and said, "I want to kill you. As a matter of fact, I want to kill everybody I see."

I said, "Well, come on in. Let's talk about it."

To make a long story short—you see, I'm here. I quickly got into conversation with him, convinced him that maybe he should talk to some professionals about this desire of his, and he finally said, "Okay."

So I called the local social services office. They knew me well. They were practically across the street. Before I knew it, about five young, tall, big fellows came over to escort him back.

God has given me all kinds of adventures and opportunities, and I just see them as another way of God expressing love.

Certainly we are comforted by God's Spirit in all kinds of situations.

I am most moved by those of you in this congregation who continue to come Sunday after Sunday, who have not given up your faith, even as you have suffered such loss as the loss of children.

This congregation has more members than any church I've ever served where people have lost children—one child, two children, one of our members even three children—and yet they have held on to that faith, not separated by these tragedies.

That is deep, deep faith.

Most often, God's love comes through others: a kind word, an encouraging word, a card, a phone call, a visit, a listening ear, and offering whatever it is you can to brighten the corner where you are.

Hannah Sachs, a UCC minister in Virginia, writes in a devotional from 1992:

"After a mortar shell killed twenty-two people in the Sarajevo bread line, Vedran Smailović didn't offer a policy paper or circulate an international petition. He was a cellist, so he put on his concert tuxedo, carried a plastic chair into the jagged crater, and played Albinoni's *Adagio in G Minor*. He played that piece for twenty-two days, one day for every person killed in that line.

"Surrounded by senseless violence, he dared to proclaim a different reality—beauty, even here, even now."

Even in the midst of all the injustice and suffering, beauty—a sign to me of God's love.

We see opportunities. Do we share God's love? Do we show God's love? We are the instruments in so many ways—but not the only way. Sometimes God's love can be revealed in other ways.

Elena was exhausted spiritually, emotionally, physically. Life had hit hard: a lost job, a broken relationship, and a diagnosis she hadn't seen coming.

One morning she shouted into the sky, "God, where are You?"

That afternoon, as she silently sat on a park bench, a gentle breeze stirred the trees. It carried the faint scent of lavender, her late grandmother's favorite flower. A quiet peace filled her heart.

No booming voice. No thunder from heaven. Just a whisper in the wind.

In that moment, she didn't need a miracle. She needed a reminder: God was there, quietly holding her through it all.

Paul tells us that God's love is here and that nothing can separate us from it.

I would say, "Just about nothing, Paul."

He says no thing. We are a body. We can separate ourselves. Not that God's love stops, but that we stop opening our hearts and souls to God's Spirit, to God's presence.

Jesus reminds His followers that spiritual awareness is a true blessing, as He says in Matthew: "You are blessed to have eyes that see and ears that hear."

Paul says that nothing, no thing, can separate God's love from us.

There was a short notice in a church bulletin from an Episcopal church in Santa Barbara, California:

"Lent is the season that invites us to ponder those things that keep us feeling separate from God."

What can separate us from God's love in Christ Jesus?

Nothing.

Not our sinfulness. Not our shortcomings. Not our stupidity. Not our lack of courage, our moral weaknesses, our prejudices and biases.

God remains with us, in us, by our sides throughout our lives. That love remains and abides.

So be open to God's Spirit, open to God's voice, God's presence, and God's love.

Richard Bach, author of several books, including *Jonathan Livingston Seagull*, has written, "Here is the test to find out if your mission on Earth is finished. If you are alive, it isn't."

Our work is not done.

May the good Lord continue to take a liking to you, that you and I may continue to share that love of God with all.

Let us come together in song: "This Little Light of Mine." I'm going to let it shine.

And I'm not trying to make Baptists of all of you.