

I John 4:7-21

⁷Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God; everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. ⁸Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love. ⁹God's love was revealed among us in this way: God sent his only Son into the world so that we might live through him. ¹⁰In this is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins. ¹¹Beloved, since God loved us so much, we also ought to love one another. ¹²No one has ever seen God; if we love one another, God lives in us, and his love is perfected in us. ¹³By this we know that we abide in him and he in us, because he has given us of his Spirit.

¹⁴And we have seen and do testify that the Father has sent his Son as the Savior of the world. ¹⁵God abides in those who confess that Jesus is the Son of God, and they abide in God. ¹⁶So we have known and believe the love that God has for us. God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them.

¹⁷Love has been perfected among us in this: that we may have boldness on the day of judgment, because as he is, so are we in this world. ¹⁸There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear; for fear has to do with punishment, and whoever fears has not reached perfection in love. ¹⁹We love because he first loved us. ²⁰Those who say, "I love God," and hate their brothers or sisters, are liars; for those who do not love a brother or sister whom they have seen, cannot love God whom they have not seen. ²¹The commandment we have from him is this: those who love God must love their brothers and sisters also.

Richard Rohr, a Franciscan priest and retreat master, likes to tell the story of the time he and a friend went to visit the American Museum of Natural History when they were in New York some years ago. They saw the dinosaur skeletons. They were standing there in wonder and in awe looking at the remains of the dinosaurs. Richard turned to his friend Michael and asked how long ago those dinosaurs lived on earth. Michael said, "Oh, about 200 million years." They stood there for a while longer in awe and wonder. Two hundred million years ago! Then Richard asked him, "How long were they on the earth?" to which Michael said, "I think they were on the earth 150 million years." Richard also mentions that since then he discovered that both of those numbers were wrong, but anyway, they stood there again in wonder and in awe. One hundred fifty million years, these guys were crawling around the earth. Richard then turned to Michael rather facetiously and said, "Michael, what did they do for 150 million years?" Michael said, "They ate grass." Richard then said to Michael, "They were on earth for 150 million years and just eating grass? What was God doing all that time?" Michael

said, "Well, I guess he was watching them eat grass." (Richard Rohr, "Job and the Mystery of Suffering" p.160)

You know that I like to watch documentaries. Almost any documentary on the subject of space will point out to us as the viewers how the earth is just a comparatively small little planet orbiting a not very big star on the edge of an average galaxy. But even though our galaxy is not tremendously big as galaxies go, there are still about a billion stars in *our* galaxy, and *our* galaxy is one of billions of galaxies. And in other documentaries, it has been pointed out countlessly that in the timeline of our earth, should the entire age of the earth be the equivalent of a year, with the earth coming into being on January 1st, then humans would have appeared on this earth in the last few seconds just before midnight on December 31st – comparatively a very short time. Of course, the documentaries do not go into this, but what in the world was God doing before God had humans to love? What in the world was God doing with all that time in which all of creation was in motion from the beginnings of time? The astrophysicists are now calculating that it has been between 8 and 12 billion years since the Big Bang, (<http://liftoff.msfc.nasa.gov/academy/universe/age.html>) which is the scientific phrase for "In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth." Was it God's idea that we would be the focal point of all of this incredible creation? Was it God's idea that we would be the purpose for this awesome universe? The big, big danger is to suppose that it is the existence of us humans which gives God a purpose – that somehow God was lonely before we walked in creation. After God brought all of creation into being, did God just hang around and watch the dinosaurs eat grass, waiting for that day millions of years on down the road, when the epitome of creation was to come along to keep God company? Or perhaps to keep God busy? Or perhaps to have someone to damn to hell if he or she did not measure up? One of my biggest wonders is how much of ourselves we humans are projecting onto a God who really is so beyond our knowing? Can I really understand a God who has masterminded and brought into being a universe as unbelievable as this in which we live? Can I really understand a God who somehow brought into being time and matter and space? Isn't it awfully presumptuous of us as human beings to think we can even begin to know the wonder of the God of the universe – we, a mere blip in the overall history of the universe, tucked away on the

edge of an average galaxy – a galaxy among billions of galaxies. And some of us humans have the audacity to think that God does not approve of those people over there because they don't do a baptismal ceremony right; or that other group's theology is not quite orthodox enough; or that group down the road is not part of the elect because they do not ascribe to the Westminster Confession of Faith written in 1647, which, by the way, almost caused a major split in the Presbyterian denomination about two and a half centuries ago. (That confession was brought into being because of an ordinance of the English House of Commons in 1643.) Is there a possibility that we might be occasionally trying to create God in *our* image rather than the other way around? I wonder. I wonder.

But speaking of the Confessions, remember the very first question and answer of both the Shorter and Larger Catechisms – which is connected with that Westminster Confession? It is probably one of the most famous questions and answers in our Book of Confessions. Question #1: "What is the chief end of man?" Answer: "Man's chief end is to glorify God, and to enjoy him forever." You know, I like that. Maybe they were onto something. But the question not asked outright in that document may be more the question many of us humans are secretly wanting to know: "What is the chief end of God?" In other words, what is God's purpose? Are we even allowed to ask that question? But I think that deep down that is the question which we who are the products of this particular culture really want to know. Our culture has deep roots in the Enlightenment of western Europe centuries ago, and the Enlightenment had its roots in the Greek philosophers from centuries before that. As children of the Enlightenment, we approach everything as knowable, with all mysteries there to be solved. If we can understand it, then we can begin to control it. Consider the work going on right now on the Bird Flu virus. The first goal of the scientists is to identify the specifics of the viruses. Next, they map its genome to more fully understand it. Once the scientists know how it infects, they can then develop an understanding of how it may someday cross over into a virus which is especially dangerous for humans. By being on the lookout for such a mutation, the scientists can then develop vaccines to fight it. Following the Enlightenment, that has been the model for how we seem to have approached many aspects of our lives. If we can understand it, we can control it. That

is why in any industry, trade secrets are so closely guarded. If you can understand exactly how my computer program works, you can then write other programs which can work off of it. Or you can write virus programs in order to hurt my computer programs. We take it even into relationships – relationships with others and relationships with ourselves. Can it be possible that there has ever been a culture more narcissistic than ours – engrossed with ourselves – understanding ourselves – taking care of ourselves – improving ourselves. As children of the Enlightenment, we have also tended to approach God in the same manner. God is to be figured out, and if the God we discover is not to our liking, we can decide to just move on and not bother ourselves with God, or perhaps we can look to another expression of religion to fit neatly into our expectations of what a God really should be like. In other words, do we tend to create God in our image? Or, maybe the question really is, "What is the chief end of God?" Perhaps too many of us live out of an answer which is along the lines of: "The chief end of God is to glorify humanity and to enjoy humanity forever." After all, if God spent 150 million years watching the dinosaurs eating grass until humans were created, it must be quite a relief for God to finally get people with brains to come along for God to actually have a relationship with. Or maybe I'm being a tad too cynical.

But consider this thought: The irreverent flip-side (or perhaps we could call it the flippant flip-side) answer to the first question of the catechism is certainly out of line – God's chief end is not to glorify humanity. But the second part of that flip-side answer would be this phrase: "...to enjoy humanity forever." Is that possible? Is it possible that God enjoys us? That God enjoys humanity? That God enjoys you and me? Is it possible that God takes delight in the creation and even in us, the creatures?

Perhaps the best known scripture in the Bible is John 3:16 – "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life." Another well loved scripture passage is from First John: "God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them." And then there is that wonderful image of the parental love which God has for us which we can read in the Gospels: "Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing!" (Luke 13:34) We can look to the words of

the creation in the first chapter of the Bible: "God saw everything that he had made, and indeed, it was very good. And there was evening and there was morning, the sixth day." (Genesis 1:31)

Again, we can ask, is it possible that God enjoys us? That God enjoys humanity? That God enjoys you and me? Is it possible that God takes delight in the creation and even in us, the creatures? I think so. I believe it is so.

We are part of a community of over six billion human beings living on this planet. Sometimes we choose to get along. Sometimes we choose to not get along. Sometimes we choose to believe in God, the creator of the universe. Sometimes we choose to believe otherwise. But regardless of whether we believe or whether we do not believe in God, that does not make God either exist or go away, because God is not just mere projections of our beliefs and hopes and dreams. Rather, God is the basis for our beliefs and hopes and dreams. And even though we six billion people for some reason are to be living together on this little planet orbiting our not so big star at the edge of our rather average sized galaxy in a universe that goes on and on and on, filled with the most fantastic and beautiful of stuff which the scientists are only beginning to see, we are not a forgotten planet – we are not a forgotten people. Who can know the whole reason for the creation of the universe? But for whatever reason God brought this immense universe into being, and even though we are but the smallest speck inhabiting the tiniest dot in this universe for just a blip on the scale of time – even though in many ways what we choose to do or not do on this planet will not make a bit of difference in God's great universe, this God still loves us – deeply. And God enjoys us deeply. And God is rooting for us, wanting us to do well, to get along, to love God and to love each other – deeply.

For many millions of years there were dinosaurs roaming this planet – long before humanity was brought into being. And, certainly, they ate a lot of grass. And, certainly, God watched them eating a lot of grass. And we would believe that in God's mind – in God's plan for this planet – there would be human beings who would come into existence, and here we are. And God saw us and, indeed, we were very good.

Let us honor our Creator with the deep love and respect and awe that is fitting such a Being. Let us keep God at the center of our hearts and souls. Let us always

walk in humility as we take step after step after step into the futures which God has given to us. And let us glorify God and enjoy God forever. Amen.