

Collins Street Baptist Church  
February 20, 2011  
10.30am & 5.00pm

**When Love Crumbles**  
Psalm 136

**Introduction**

Today we conclude our series of reflections on the question, ‘So what?’ Over four weeks we have asked what difference our Christian faith makes when disaster strikes, when death intrudes, when disappointment sets in, and today, when love crumbles. I began by confessing that questions like these are wretchedly difficult to answer. All I can do in the space of 15 minutes each week is to suggest some images and stories to prod you in your thinking—to help you reflect again upon your own experience. That is no less true today that it has been these past three weeks.

As you leave today, you’ll find the text of these four reflections in booklet form in the Narthex. Also included are the prayers and psalms that we have used in our liturgy week by week. I don’t do this because I think my words are especially inspiring, but simply as a way for our conversation about these things to continue. The truth is, if our faith makes no difference at life’s lowest and most difficult points, then perhaps its time we gave it away. If it does make a difference, then it becomes a gift of immeasurable worth, and even more, one worth sharing with others.

Let’s take a moment to be still before God and to listen for God’s voice.

**When Love Crumbles**

This week we celebrated Valentine’s Day. It’s popularity, even in the last decade, has skyrocketed. It’s a day when long-stemmed roses sell out across the city, along with heart-shaped boxes of chocolates, garishly coloured helium balloons and teddy bears. It’s a day for romance, or at least one to celebrate romance. And, frankly, it’s

a day for greeting card companies and chocolatiers to make a killing. In many ways it's a harmless, even endearing festival when young love blushes publically for the first time and old love cherishes its gift. In other ways it's an excluding day of pain; a day that reminds many people of what they do not have, of what has failed in their lives, or of whose lack makes them somehow incomplete.

Romantic love is a fickle and elusive thing. Intimate love between two people is as fragile as the rose that celebrates it. Before very long, the petals wilt and fall, browning at the edges before decaying into nothing. What was once as beautiful as life can be is gone. When romantic love comes to us it is a wonderful thing. But when it crumbles, falls into pieces, turns bitter in our mouths, or constantly eludes us, it can be anything but wonderful. The potential for hurt and resentment is high. In an intimate relationship with another human being, the possibility of joy is only matched by the depth of pain it can cause. Intimate love calls for a level of vulnerability and trust that can be both its greatest reward and its greatest cost. Those who've experienced the crumbling away of love will tell you the pain of a broken heart is a pain all its own; and those who have experienced the complete absence of romance will tell you that the longing and regret never fade.

The question for us today is, what difference does faith make when love crumbles?

The Christian faith is built on love. It begins in the love of God and finds its ultimate expression in Christ's selfless surrender to death. It is also the essence of our response to God's love. Our call to faith is a call to love God with heart, soul, mind and strength and to love our neighbour as ourselves. But what is immediately obvious is that this love of God is an entirely different love to that of the roses and whispered endearments of Valentines Day. It is a love that births life and sustains it; it is a love that endures pain and hardship; it is a love of steadfast hope and enduring strength; but it is very little to do with intimacy.

Psalm 136 says it over and over again: *'His steadfast loves endures forever.'* If we read into the psalms our popular notion of love as an intimate caress, we will entirely underestimate what Christian faith has to say when human love crumbles. If we are looking simply for something to make us feel light headed and warmly affectionate on a Sunday morning, we will only replace this fickle human love with a love equally fragile. But if we come to know the love of God as an undergirding, strengthening, enduring, empowering love—one that sustains and renews our hope and our life—then we are onto something worth believing in. The love of God is a love proved through the fires and trials of life. According to Psalm 136, it is through God's eternal work of creation and providence, through God's work of deliverance and protection, through God's work of redemption and forgiveness, through God's work of restoration and healing, that God's steadfast love is proven time and time again to be absolutely dependable. There is nothing fragile or fickle about it.

There is a popular expression of Christian faith today that paints God as a substitute lover and Jesus as the perfect boyfriend. Personal intimacy with God is the ultimate value. At its extreme end—through books and seminars currently flourishing across North America—Christian women are encouraged to arrange 'date nights with Jesus', setting a candle-lit table for two, one place set for Prince Jesus who lingers with his princess in intimate union. More commonly, the worship of the church is given over to songs sung by men and women bidding God to 'hold me, touch me, love me' as we swoon together in the presence of a caressing Deity. I do not mean to be disrespectful of faith that is heartfelt. Personally, I feel things too deeply to dismiss those longings even for a moment. What I am suggesting is that if all we ever desire in our relationship with God is warmth and affection, we may well miss the very essence of what faith offers us when human love fails.

Interestingly, Saint Valentine's Day was established back in 496AD by Pope Gelasius I, a day to commemorate one of the early Christian saints by that name. We do not know for sure just which one he had in mind, but there are three possibilities. The *first* is *Saint Valentine of Rome* who played a key role in assisting early Christians

being persecuted under the orders of the Emperor Claudius II. Eventually he was apprehended and ordered to publically renounce his faith. He refused and was subsequently beaten with clubs and then beheaded. His execution happened on February 14 in the year 270AD. The *second* is *Saint Valentine of Terni*, another leader of the early church martyred in 197AD under the vicious persecution of Emperor Aurelian. This saint had a particular ministry of healing among the poor, the old and infirm—those most commonly forgotten in any society. The *third* option is the one we know least about, another Saint by the name of Valentine who, on an unknown date in the church's early history, was brutally martyred in Africa along with a number of his companions.

When you read these stories, what is immediately obvious is how little they tell of romantic love so idealized today and how much they tell of a sacrificial, self-giving love—a love they had experienced themselves in God and a love that compelled them to a life of ultimate self-giving. Christian spirituality has always been marked by an encounter with God that results in a deeper and more sustained love for other people. It is entirely sacrificial in nature, both in what we receive and in what we are called to provide. It is not, first and foremost, about intimacy with God. Rather it is about a life sustained by God, transformed by God, and called by God into service for others. It is this that makes our Christian faith such an invaluable resource when human love crumbles and falls.

A saint in the history of the church who knew this well is the 16<sup>th</sup> century Spanish mystic, Teresa of Avila. As a young girl Teresa was consumed with romantic fantasies. It is said that at age 7 she made an attempt to run away from home 'to the land of Moors' in search of martyrdom. She also shared her mother's addiction to romance novels, the Mills-and-Boons of the day. In her early adolescence she was obsessed with clothes, jewellery and romantic infatuations. At age 16 she was involved in a 'flirtation' of some sort, serious enough to cause a minor scandal in her hometown. Her father decided that she needed the restraint of a convent.

Teresa's early days with the Augustinian nuns were fraught with internal struggles and longings. Her passion for romance and divine intimacy continued in the church. Her early infatuations, however, led to nothing but depression and spiritual emptiness. It was not until some 20 years later, as she knelt before a statue of Christ 'scourged at the pillar' that she underwent what she described as her 'second conversion'. It was as she looked upon the love of Christ so graphically exhibited before her that she came to understand the real nature of God's love. What followed for Teresa was years of extraordinary ministry. In fact, her impact on the renewal of the church and its commitment to ministries of justice and compassion is almost unparalleled in Christian history. Granted there were moments of unusual intimacy with God for Teresa, manifested in ways I can barely comprehend. But intimacy was a serendipitous consequence of a life inspired by and dedicated to the steadfast love of God in Christ; it was never the end game.

Human love comes and goes; romantic love rises and falls with the wind; but the steadfast love of God endures forever. What difference does faith make when love crumbles? Perhaps the difference it makes arises out of the character of the love upon which it rests, a love not primarily of intimacy or of tender caresses, but a love that holds us unfailingly when everything else around us shatters. Perhaps the difference faith makes is that it calls us beyond our own pain, our needs and longings, to the needs and longings of others. In her writing, Teresa of Avila speaks continuously of 'embracing the cross', of finding our ultimate union with God in a life of sacrificial love. Each drop of love we show for others, she says, is gathered up in the endless ocean of God's enduring love for the world—a love that knows no end, a love that never crumbles.