

**HAPPINESS IS...
A WARM PUPPY
JULY 22, 2012**

How many of you have a dog?

We've always had a dog.

Jill had dogs when she was growing up, and so did I.

In fact, I was raised by a dog.

She was one year older than.

We have a 10 year old yellow Lab.

We named her Phoebe, after the ditzy blond on the TV show Friends.

She wants nothing more than our love.

Well, she might want our food more.

But it's a close tie.

One of the all-time favorite quotes from Charles Schultz's comic strip Peanuts is,

"Happiness is a warm puppy."

It's a favorite because there is so much truth in it.

Having a dog who loves you is a wonderful thing.

It brings a lot of happiness.

Our human tie to dogs is an ancient one,

and has been a powerful ingredient of human life in many cultures.

It didn't take much research to find

admiring comments about dogs from a fascinating array of people.

The ancient Greek philosopher Aristotle said,

"There is honor in being a dog."

Mark Twain said,

"Heaven goes by favour.

If it went by merit,

you would stay out and your dog would go in."

Author Rudyard Kipling, writing a story about Adam and Eve, created this dialogue:

"When the Man waked up he said,

'What is Wild Dog doing here?'

And the Woman said,

'His name is not Wild Dog any more,

but the First Friend,

because he will be our friend

for always and always and always."

Charles De Gaulle,

General of the Free French Forces during WWII and later President of France,

said, "The better I get to know men,

the more I find myself loving dogs."

Ann Landers warned,

"Know yourself.

Don't accept your dog's admiration as conclusive evidence

that you are wonderful."

And that wise sage of our time, Andy Rooney, said,

"The average dog is a nicer person than the average person."

And then there are cats.

Philosopher Alfred North Whitehead said,

"If a dog jumps in your lap, it is because he is fond of you;

but if a cat does the same thing, it is because your lap is warmer."

Just kidding!

I like cats, too, as does our dog.

So don't send me hate mail.

It was just a cheap preacher stunt to get a laugh.

In truth, there is something about a good dog that can touch the soul and brings happiness.

It's expressed well in a video you may have seen online:

God and Dog, by Wendy Francisco

"I look up and I see God,

I look down and see my dog.

Simple spelling G O D,

same word backwards, D O G.

They would stay with me all day.

I'm the one who walks away.

But both of them just wait for me,

and dance at my return with glee.

Both love me no matter what –

divine God and canine mutt.

I take it hard each time I fail,

but God forgives, dog wags his tail.

God thought up and made the dog,

dog reflects a part of God.

I've seen love from both sides now,

it's everywhere, amen, bow wow.

I look up and I see God,

I look down and see my dog.

And in my human frailty...

I can't match their love for me."

Happiness is a warm puppy because we find happiness in being loved.

Other things may bring us pleasure, a laugh, or a thrill.

But being loved, truly loved, by another brings happiness.

And so, as Christians, we who know ourselves to be loved by God,

the greatest love of all,

have the greatest of all reasons to be happy.

But we get many other messages into our heads.

Messages that say things like,

You are what you produce; you are what you achieve.

Do you make good grades?

Do you bring in big bucks?

Do you get job promotions?

Or the message that says,

Your value is based on your looks.

Which means no actual living person measures up,

but only those who live in doctored photographs.

It might be the messages you absorbed in the rough spots of childhood.

All sorts of labels might have been stuck on you.

Ugly, worthless, bad, stupid, lazy, useless.

Or maybe no one noticed you at all,

and you learned that your existence didn't matter.

We get lots of other messages in our heads and our hearts.

And we forget the message of the One who matters more than any other,

the message that says, "I love you this much." **(arms outstretched like on a cross)**

It may be time for you to get a dog.

And then God just might speak his love to you.

The most important message of all is God's love for you.

God created you because he wants to love you.

The Bible says God created you in his image,

(Ge.1:26-27)

with a capacity for relationships, with the capacity to love and be loved.

And the Bible says God's love comes first.

We don't have to love him first in order for him to love us.

God's love comes first.

The Bible says, "We love God because God first loved us."

(1Jn.4:19)

How many times has a new puppy turned to its master without reservation
and won over the human heart?

That is what God seeks to do with each one of us.

The Bible also says we don't earn God's love by being good or going to church.

In Paul's letter to the church in Rome it says,

"When we were still powerless, Christ died for the ungodly.

God demonstrates his own love for us in this:

While we were still sinners, Christ died for us."

(Ro.5:6, 8)

Have you ever seen your dog stand in harsh, unyielding judgment of you?

If you forget to feed him, he'll still love you.

If you accidentally step on his tail, he'll still love you.

If you speak harshly to him, he'll still love you.

If you don't let him up on the furniture, he'll still love you.

A good dog is one of the most forgiving creatures there is.

A decent reflection of God's attitude toward us sinners.

The scripture verse everyone knows is John 3:16,

"God so loved the world that he gave his only Son,

that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life." (Jn.3:16)

God so loved the world.

The Greek word for "world" is "cosmos,"

the whole creation.

It is often used to refer to sinners,

people who are far from God, people who are rebelling against God.

God so loved us, no matter how deep and dark our sin may be.

God so loved you.

How much did he love the world?

So much that he gave.

A lot of time people will use the word "love" to express
what they want for themselves.

"I love ice cream" means I want ice cream.

"I love that girl" may mean I want that girl.

But real love is not my desire to get something for me.

Real love gives to the other, sacrifices for the other.

God so loved us that he gave his only Son.

He surrendered that which was most precious to him.

And Jesus, the Son of God, loved the Father and loves you

so much that he gave himself up for your sake.
 Because of his gift, if we receive it as his gift to us,
 we have forgiveness and eternal life.

About all that Jesus said, "Greater love has no one than this,
 that they lay down their life for their friend." (Jn.15:13)

How far will a dog go to show love for its master?
 We're all heard those true stories of dogs that
 somehow got separated from their family
 and traveled across miles of unknown territory
 to get back home.

How far did God go to love his sinful creatures?
 All the way from heaven to earth,
 to the cross, to the grave,
 in order to pay the penalty for our sins.
 And then from the grave to life and heaven again,
 so we might rise to new life now
 and have fellowship with him forever.

All those other messages we get do tend to echo around in our heads and our hearts.
 But what about the message of God's love for you?

We have to make an effort to embed it in our hearts and minds.

By reading of God's love in the Scriptures,
 and reading it on a regular basis.

You didn't get those other messages because someone said something to you once.

It's because the messages came at you, and still come at you,
 time after time after time.

That's how advertisers work.

Repeat exposure.

You don't buy their product because you once saw a commercial.

You buy it because you've seen it again and again.

You've got the tune of a jingle stuck in your head.

You can see the images in your mind.

Repeat exposure.

And it will require repeat exposure to the truth of Scripture

for it to become the message in your head.

You'll need to take some personal responsibility in this.

That means a set time each day where you can have a few uninterrupted moments,
 a set place with good lighting for reading,
 a good modern translation that is understandable,
 and reading just a little bit and listening for what God wants to say to you.

If you're a beginner at this, start by reading through one of the Gospels,
 so you can focus on the story of Jesus.

God's message of his love for you can be reinforced by a small group of Christian friends
 who are serious about being CHRISTIAN friends.

You meet regularly, maybe every week, to tell each other about your walk with Christ.

Where you were faithful, where you sinned,
 where you need their insights, what God is teaching you.

Hold each other accountable, encourage each other,
 correct each other, pray for each other.

In sharing your lives together you can, over time,

learn to trust each other more, gradually go deeper,
and love each other more completely.

You can experience God's love more fully by expressing your love to him in worship.

Christian worship is not a spectator event.

It is a participatory activity.

That means no hands in pockets, no arms crossed.

Opening your mouth and singing God's praises.

Opening your mind to learning God's word.

Opening your heart to loving God.

The more you open your heart to express your love for God,
the more your heart will be open to receive God's love.

A closed heart can neither give nor receive.

An open heart can do both.

You can experience God's love more fully by expressing your love to him in worship.

You can experience God's love by considering the way your dog loves you
and realizing sometimes God really is reflected in his creatures.

Your dog loves you even when you forget about him,

when you have neglected to spend time with him,

when you were two hours late with his meal,

your dog still loves you.

Even with all of that, your dog would like to spend time with you,
to have your attention and your affection.

And your dog will wait and watch and hope for that love to come his way.

And that's the way God loves you.

John Wesley gave his ministers in America a book of doctrines, rules and worship liturgy,
much of which came from the Church of England.

In the worship liturgy there was a prayer prayed in preparation to receive communion.

The prayer is called "The Prayer of Humble Access."

It begins with these words,

*"We do not presume to come to this thy Table, O merciful Lord,
trusting in our own righteousness,
but in thy manifold and great mercies.*

We are not worthy so much as to gather up the crumbs under thy Table.

But thou art the same Lord,

whose property is always to have mercy."

We are not worthy so much as to gather up the crumbs under thy Table.

Like your dog lurking around the dinner table at meal time,

waiting for someone to drop something.

My dad is forever secretly slipping little bits of food from his plate down to his dog.

If reincarnation was real, I think the ultimate would be to

be reincarnated as my dad's dog.

But God's love for us is greater still,

and we are invited not only to gather crumbs beneath the table,

but to join him at the table.

You are loved.

You are loved by a love you cannot stop.

You are loved by a love that will go to any lengths to bless you.

You are loved.

So when you go home, hug your dog, and give thanks to your God.

Scriptures cited: Ge.1:26-27; 1Jn.4:19; Ro.5:6, 8; Jn.3:16; 15:13