

St. David's Presbyterian Church
St. John's, NL
"Surprising Insights Into Love"
Dr. J. Dent

September 7, 2008
Proper 18

Before we get to what I think are some of the surprising aspects of love, I want to begin by saying I don't think I'm very good at loving. Does that surprise you? I'm learning to love. But I do know the One who is the Lord of Love and the Author of Life, and He is very good at loving. All of us who have enrolled in God's school of love are invited to follow Him.

Of course following Jesus is the core of Christianity. Missing that relationship is more than missing the depths of love, it is missing the meaning of life. So once again as we come to the Scriptures, the Lord of Love meets us, greets us, embraces us, asks us to take a deep breath, and to go on a journey that encompasses new heights and new depths of love.

Everyone reading the lectionary, across the denominations, has been listening to the story of Moses and the Exodus. We've come to the point in the story where the people are on the verge of leaving the land of slavery and sin, and moving on to the promised land of God. But before that exodus occurs, one final plague takes place. This plague is where God allows a sickness to take the firstborn of every family.

God has always used death to remind us of our mortality and limits. God uses a number of seasons of life to help us turn again to God. For some of us, it is illness, and limitation. For others, it is losses, in relationships, in employment, in possessions. God uses both the difficult and stormy seasons of life as well as the joyful, celebratory seasons, such as births and marriages and accomplishments of many kinds. In every season, God draws us back to Himself, away from the rebellious tendencies that we have, back to the core issues of life; back to love, for instance.

As a part of that final plague, God teaches the people of Israel about the Messiah, about Jesus who is to come. The Lamb of God is foreshadowed in the Passover lamb: a strong, healthy, young male in the prime of life, given as a sacrifice for us. We understand that the symbol of that lamb's life is his blood, and it is placed over the doorway of the family home, so that when the Destroyer comes during the plague, he was to "pass over" the homes marked with the blood of the lamb. And so throughout the New Testament,

the Gospel of Christ's life given for us, accepted by us, trusted fully to take away the death penalty of our sins is portrayed in this final act before the exodus. We are safe from the death penalty of our sins as we trust the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world. We see in Jesus' sacrificial act one aspect of love: giving. It is more blessed to give than receive. Love is giving.

I know much of what we see and hear in stories, movies, and the media is about getting love. But Jesus teaches us about giving, sacrificial giving. Seeking other's best first. Love is patient, kind, not envious, not boastful, not proud nor rude, not self-seeking, not easily angered, keeping no record of wrongs, not delighting in evil, but rejoicing in truth, always protecting, trusting, hoping, persevering. (1 Corinthians 13:4 – 7) You can see why I say I haven't advanced far in the school of love, a.k.a. Love University, Love U. Every one of these items Paul mentions in 1 Corinthians 13 come with a story I could tell you about my impatience, unkindness, envy, boastful words, pride and rudeness, selfishness and so on.

So the first attribute that may surprise you about love is that it involves self-giving, sacrificial care. Ask God what that means for you in your relationship to others. Don't ask God about what that means for how others should treat you. Ask about what it means for how you should behave toward others. Because you won't have to give an account to God for how others behaved toward you, but you will be responsible for how you treated others.

The second surprising thing about love may or may not be surprising to you as well. It comes from the Psalmist in Psalm 149. "Sing to the Lord a new song." Love is creative. We read from the Psalms every week. We hear a new praise song from the Psalms every week. We can only imagine what it sounded like originally in Hebrew with Semitic music on instruments foreign to our Western ears. But it was praise sung out of love to God. I hope that's what's on your mind when we sing here on Sunday morning, or indeed, coming up on Saturday night. Because no matter how new or how old the songs, how well known or unknown the music is that we sing, the main thing is directing our hearts and minds toward God as we sing. Even if you don't sing, but you are thinking about the praise and lifting it up to God in your hearts and minds, God knows. And that's what matters. You can belt out every note of music, but without your heart and your mind in it, it doesn't matter, just like a cymbal crash or an eastern gong. And so

creativity is essential to love. Ask God what creative, practical things he wants to do with loving your family members, or your friends, or neighbours, or even strangers. Then listen to what you hear from God, and risk loving in God's way.

And by the way, that stuff about the two-edged sword in the hands of believers should be interpreted in light of the New Covenant, and Paul's "put on the full armour of God" in Ephesians 6. The sword is not a literal killing device in some kind of crusade, but the Scripture which cuts all who hear it with the truth and love of God. All nations, all humanity will stand before God and God's truth.

Love is sacrificial and creative. In Romans, Paul talks about love as an "outstanding debt." Now some have taken verse 8 of Romans 13 "Owe no one anything" (NRSV) to mean that we should never have mortgages or loans of any kind. I've known some Christians who tried to call me to task because I have loans and a mortgage. But this misinterprets the thrust of verse 8 and loses a surprising insight into love. The point Paul is making is that we have mortgages and loans that can be and will be paid off. But the one debt that cannot be paid off, is that of loving every person who comes into our path, loving them sacrificially, creatively.

Now you may be saying to yourself: "You must be nuts, Paul. You must have lost it, Jonathan." If I loved like that, I would be completely burned out with nothing left. And yet we know God tells us to love our neighbors as ourselves, to care for those God has put in our paths (that's the parable of the Good Samaritan, where Jesus answers the question of the man who wants to justify himself by asking "Who is my neighbour?" with the simple answer: anyone God puts in our path). We are to love in such amazing ways, that people will be stunned at how well they are loved. But how can we possibly love that way? The first answer is that we cannot, unless God puts His supernatural provision into our hearts to do so. As God loves us, and pours His love into us, then we can love others, otherwise we cannot, and we simply burn out, unable to love as we ought.

The second answer is that love which is sacrificial, creative, an outstanding debt, also has boundaries on it. Jesus talks about the fact that others will "sin against us," not just people outside the congregation, but people inside as well. People will hurt us in many ways. If it is verbally, then we need to talk privately with them. And if that doesn't work, then take someone else

along who they respect. Here in Matthew 18 is one of the boundaries on how we deal with our disputes with one another, on how we love each other, when we hurt each other. Notice I said “when we hurt each other,” not “if we hurt each other.” In this congregation, we have accountability structures which help us practically deal with “sinning against each other.” The church members and leaders here are accountable to the Session, the elders. The Minister is accountable to the Presbytery, which is locally made up of others Ministers and Elders from the three congregations in Newfoundland. This Presbytery is in turn accountable to the Synod of the Atlantic Provinces which in turn is accountable to the national General Assembly.

The point is that loving each other means knowing our accountability within the community of the congregation, within the community of the Church. Of course, there are extreme cases where the police must be called, when laws are broken, when life and health is threatened. But normally disputes are handled as a way of loving another person, by mutually being accountable to authorities which are placed over us for our good.

By the way, I also believe that we do not have to say “yes” to every request that comes our way. For instance, if someone asks you for money on the road, or in the office, you are not under obligation to give every time. Not every Christian will agree with me on this point, and I am open to dialogue. Jesus does say earlier in Matthew that we are to give the one who asks you and not to turn away from one who wants to borrow. (5:42, NIV) It is difficult to know who is truly needy and who is not. We are not loving addicts by giving them money indiscriminately, we are enabling their addiction. Yet we should be giving. How can we know how best to love those who appear to be in need? We need to ask God. We do need to help others, but not giving money every time. Our only freedom is simply to love, and one of the most difficult lessons to learn as a parent, as a giver, as a lover is when to say “No.” Our time, attention and care, however, is required. Jesus does not leave us off the hook of caring and loving.

So there are some surprising twists and turns to loving including sacrifice, creativity, a perpetual requirement to love others as God puts them in our pathways, and a necessary accountability that Jesus talks about, accountability to appropriate authorities in the church and society that God has given us to sort out our conflicts. Because loving someone is always risky, and guaranteed to eventually involve conflicts. While it is simpler to just leave a congregation when conflict arises, nevertheless, Jesus calls us to

love one another, which involves dealing with our conflicts, not running away from them. All of this tests how well and how deeply we are prepared to love one another and God. Are you prepared to ask God to help you be more loving, even if it means all of the above: sacrifice, creativity, an ongoing loving spirit toward everyone God puts in our paths, and a resolve to be accountable, and under appropriate authority? Am I?

And of course, when we agree to love in this way, then we need to learn more about forgiveness, which is next week's teaching.

Let us pray.