

The St. Andrew's Pulpit

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September 7, 2014

Love is Not a Motherhood Issue

...the one who loves another has fulfilled the law. – Romans 13:8-10

“Love one another” Jesus once said, and how can you argue with that? The greatest gift of all is love, as the apostle Paul said so eloquently, Love of God and love of neighbour are the two greatest commandments, as Jesus and the rabbis agreed. “love is the fulfilling of the law” as Paul said in this morning’s reading. All of that is true, and yet...

Has love become a motherhood issue, a virtue that is so vague and all encompassing that everyone can appeal to it to mean whatever they want? Love is the subject of a huge amount of popular music, the topic of endless exploration in television shows, movies, and novels. “All you need is love,” sang the Beatles. “It’s easy... Love is all you need.”

But is it so easy? If everyone agrees that love is important, does it actually provide any guidance for our relationships with each other? If it is so easy, why do parents whose teenagers are addicted to booze or drugs have so much trouble figuring out how to love them? If it is so easy, why does it seem so inadequate to tell partners in an abusive relationship just to love one another? If it is so easy, what guidance does love offer us in the hospital when a family have to decide whether to terminate life support, or in international negotiations over how to address the nuclear ambitions of North Korea, or over how to balance the self-interest of many nations so that we can avoid catastrophic climate change, or in the classroom where complex decisions have to be made about how to meet the needs of many different children? It isn’t easy, and sometimes you need wisdom, training, experience, advice, negotiation, guidelines, rules and lots else besides to negotiate the right solution.

If everyone agrees that love is important, has love become such an inoffensive, all-inclusive term that you can use it to justify pretty much anything? If the parent whose discipline borders on child abuse can argue that she did it out of love, don’t we need a little more definition to the idea of love? If the pedophile defends his abuse of children on the basis of his love for them, don’t we need to be a little bit more precise about what we mean by love? If the philanderer and the pornographer justify their cheapening of sexual acts by appeals to ‘free love,’ don’t we need to define what love means in some detail?

In the 1960’s the most popular book on ethics argued that rules and laws are too rigid and inflexible as guides for action in morally complex situations, that they can never be detailed enough to address the complexities of every situation. Instead, it was argued, all we need is love. If we determine the loving act in a given situation, then we will know what the right thing to do would be. It seems like a very Christian ethic, since, as Paul

says, “if you love another, you have fulfilled the law,” and as Jesus and the rabbis agree, love of God and neighbour are the two greatest commandments.

But what an emphasis on love alone seems to suggest is that we should be able to solve all problems by the seat of our pants, by our intuition about what the loving thing to do in any given situation would be. The problem is that, just as common sense is not very common, our intuitions about love can often be way off base. Even good people don’t always agree about what the loving thing to do would be, and the emphasis on love alone doesn’t help people to resolve those disagreements. In fact, it can turn a disagreement into a very personal battle over who is more loving. The requirements of love often need to be guided by careful deliberation, communal discernment and thoughtful debate.

One problem is that we don’t know which action is more loving unless we have some example of love against which to measure it. And that is why, for those of us who seek to follow Jesus, his commandment to love shouldn’t be separated from the person who gave the commandment. I started this sermon by quoting Jesus’ commandment, to love one another, but I left something out of that commandment which is actually pretty important. Can anyone finish the sentence? “Love one another, *as I have loved you*.” In other words, the commandment to love is given content and form by the story of Jesus’ life and ministry, by his healing and teaching, by his pursuit of truth and justice and his willingness to suffer and die. We know what love means because of Jesus’ life; we know what love costs because of his suffering and death; we know that love is worth that cost because of his resurrection.

My teacher Stanley Hauerwas once wrote that the cross is at the center of the Christian life because Christ beckons us to face the truth that the world is filled with suffering, injustice and cruelty. “As Christians our ethical task is to see the world as it is in the confidence that we can look upon and face the agony of the world without its destroying us.” [Vision and Virtue, p. 117]

Imagine a young man, the father of a young family, who has an incurable cancer. There was a time when people thought the loving thing to do was to withhold the painful truth that he is dying, in order to spare him the mental anguish of knowing that his life is coming to an end, and that his wife and children will have to go on without him. Surely, they might argue, the loving thing to do is to spare him the truth so that he can have as much happiness as possible in the time he has left. But if love rejoices in the truth, how can he be spared the truth? To do so is to spare him the opportunity to learn to live and to die well. Often, in such situations, people avoid telling the truth because they are afraid themselves of facing the truth, and trying to spare themselves the suffering that true love entails. Love is not cruel, not arrogant, or boastful or rude. It does not intentionally inflict suffering, but it must often face suffering and endure suffering or it is not love. It suffers with – which is what compassion means, to suffer with.

And so love is measured, not by the depth of loving feelings on a wedding day, but by the ability to suffer together, through the bad times as well as the good, in times of poverty as

well as times of comfort, in sickness as well as health, in sorrow as well as joy. That is why Christian love is tested by its ability to face the reality of life in all its components without fear.

That is why, while the media attention shifts rapidly from the Middle East to Syria, from the Ukraine to North Korea, we in the United Church make long term commitments to our overseas partners through the Mission and Service Fund, national staff and individual congregations, working closely with organizations seeking to bring together people across the barriers that divide Israelis from Palestinians, Koreans from North and South, just to give two examples, because Jesus' life has given us the ability to walk together with people in the midst of struggle and pain without fear.

In 2010, the media was all over Haiti when it was flattened by a catastrophic earthquake. Today, you don't hear much about Haiti, but we are still working with our Haitian partners, as we did before, suffering with the people, because Jesus' life has given us the ability to face the reality of poverty and hunger without fear.

That is why, when people here in Red Deer need support, our pastoral Care and Benevolent ministries are there to help. That is why we support Seniors picnics, AA and AlAnon groups, because Jesus' life has given us the ability to accompany people facing illness and addiction, discrimination and poverty without fear.

That is why, when people in this congregation or community are dealing with terminal illness, divorce or death, we as a church are able to be with them, in ways that people without a strong faith commitment find difficult, because we have learned through Jesus that we can face even the most difficult situations of life without fear. We are not a perfect congregation, by any means, and we often fail, but that is what we aim for, that is what we strive for.

There are complex questions in families, in schools, in hospitals, in communities that need people who can hang in there when the right thing to do is not certain, when the way out is not clear, when it is not even clear if there is a way out. There are difficult situations when we need people who will not seek the easy answer just because it is easy, but who will suffer with and suffer for and struggle and learn and debate and pray and wait until the best action among many poor choices becomes clear, because they have learned not to be controlled by their fear.

That is why Jesus said, "Love one another, as I have loved you," because he loved us through his life and death and new life, so that we might live and love free from fear of life as it really is. Amen.