

“There are these two young fish swimming along and they happen to meet an older fish swimming the other way, who nods at them and says "Morning, boys. How's the water?" And the two young fish swim on for a bit, and then eventually one of them looks over at the other and goes "What the heck is water?"

Every single one of us is immersed in an atmosphere that we can't fully appreciate; an atmosphere that constrains our movements and influences our thoughts, and it does all this without any of us noticing. Here is where the snake oil salesman would sell you five keys to unlocking the hidden knowledge, but the truth is we don't notice it the same way we don't notice our breathing or our breakfast digesting. It happens not because we think about it, and not because we will it – but because it is our nature.

We are, as Tim has reminded us over the past few weeks, from of and for love. Love is our origin, our identity, and our purpose. But imagine sitting down and looking at a map that promises to lead you to the Kingdom of Love, but offers you no compass rose, no legend, no “this way up”. You could spend the rest of your life wandering aimlessly with nothing more than a chance of arrival.

If we want to arrive at our destination, the place we were made for, we need a way to orient our hearts around our nature. We need to develop rhythms to make our love as unconscious as breathing so that love itself becomes our second nature.

This is the thrust of Paul's charge to the church in Colossae. A good person is not born or made. Virtues are not what you think or what you do. They are what you wear. They surround you and enwrap you, but they do not come from within you. Virtues, are designed, made, and finally chosen.

Virtue is designed. It is tailor made for you. We have this tendency to think that virtue comes from within, that's it's already part of us. I know this tendency well. I've always struggled with Self Control. Put me in front of a buffet, and watch out. I can dive deep into a video game and when I finally come up for air, I realize I haven't actually seen the sun all day. My natural way of thinking says that God made me this way, so I guess self-control just isn't one of my fruits of the spirit. I let myself off the hook, and the truth is that I never get to find out what I'm actually capable of. But if virtue is about creating a second nature, then my premise can still hold. God made me this way. I am from love. But God isn't done with me yet. Christian Virtue is a recognition that there

is no cookie-cutter approach to discipleship. Discipleship is not simply a prescribed formula of do's and don'ts: it is an active and engaged relationship with the God who made each of us. We put on virtue not because we earn anything by it – what else can we earn when God's already spoken over us and says "I have loved you, and called you by name. Child, you are mine." We put on virtue because God has already said You are mine, and this is the choice to follow through on the act of love. Virtue is an intentional response to Grace.

The theologian Dallas Willard put it this way: "Grace is not opposed to effort, it is opposed to earning. Earning is an attitude. Effort is an action. Grace, you know, does not just have to do with forgiveness of sins alone."

Secondly, Virtue is made; a habit we form rather than a way we behave. When Cody sits down at the Piano on Sunday morning, he makes music look easy. He makes it seem like the Piano wants to make melodies and sing, but he can only do that because he spent hours and hours teaching his fingers to move the way they do - learning the scales, building ambidexterity, figuring out theory. All of it, slowly and steadily building a second nature that Cody doesn't have to think about. Virtue is made: it is the habitual act of choosing to form habits that make you into the kind of person you want to be.

Christian virtue is the recognition that we are perpetually in progress: being humble that we might become more humble; being kind that we might become more kind; being compassionate that we might become more compassionate; being meek that we might become meeker; being patient that we might become more patient.

Finally, Virtue is chosen. Like the widower who can't bring himself to take off his wedding ring because his hand feels weird without it, you wear something for long enough or put it on enough times, and you can't imagine life without it. Presbyterians for too long have failed to focus on our virtues because we believed, Christianity happened in our heads. We have generations of Christian Leaders, Ministers and Elders who have shaped the church to indoctrinate the mind first and let everything flow from there. My question for that approach is simply this: how's that been working for us so far?

We are for love. It is the end God has made us for and pointed us toward, but as men and women seeking to follow Christ in the midst of a world that cares less and less about religion, we need to hear Paul's call to put on love with fresh ears - because if we don't, we will put

something else on. Bob Dylan was right when he reminded us “Everybody’s got to serve somebody.”

We need this because culture eats intention for breakfast.

The theologian James Smith invites us to take a pilgrimage to what might be the most religious site in our city and see with new eyes the love toward which our atmosphere orients us.

“It is the kind of place that may be quite familiar to many of you, but my task here is to invite you to see it with new eyes.

As we’re still off at a distance, I want you to notice the sheer popularity of the site as indicated by the colorful sea of parking that surrounds the building. The site is throbbing with pilgrims every day of the week as thousands and thousands make the pilgrimage. In order to provide a hospitable environment and absorb the daily influx of the faithful, the site provides an ocean of parking. But the monotony of black tarmac is covered by dots of color from cars and SUVs lined up, row by row, patiently waiting as the pilgrims devote themselves to the rituals inside. Indeed, the parking lot constitutes a kind of moat around the building since there are no sidewalks that lead to the site.

We come to one of several grandiose entrees to the building, channeling us through a colonnade of chromed arches to the towering glass face, with doors lining its base. As we enter the space, we are ushered into a narthex of sorts intended for receiving, orienting, and channeling new seekers. There is a large map—a kind of worship aid—to give the novice an orientation to the location of various spiritual offerings and provide direction into the labyrinth that organizes and channels the ritual observance of the pilgrims.

The design of the interior is inviting to an almost excessive degree, sucking us into the enclosed interior spaces, with windows on the ceiling open to the sky but none on the walls open to the surrounding automotive moat. This conveys a sense of vertical and transcendent openness that at the same time shuts off the clamor and distractions of the horizontal, mundane world. This architectural mode of enclosure and enfolding offers a feeling of sanctuary, retreat, and escape.

... The layout of this temple has architectural echoes that hark back to the medieval cathedrals—mammoth religious spaces that can absorb all kinds of different religious activities all at one time. And so one might say that this religious building has a winding labyrinth for contemplations, alongside of which are innumerable

chapels devoted to various saints. As we wander we'll be struck by the rich iconography that lines the walls and interior spaces. Here is an array of three-dimensional icons adorned in garb that inspires us to be imitators of these exemplars. These statues and icons embody for us concrete images of "the good life." Here is a religious proclamation that does not traffic in abstracted ideals or rules or doctrines, but rather offers to the imagination pictures and statues and moving images, offering embodied pictures of the "redeemed" that invite us imagine ourselves in their shoes. ...This is a gospel whose power is beauty, which speaks to our deepest desires and compels us to come not with dire moralisms but rather with a winsome invitation to share in this envisioned good life.

As we pause to reflect on some of the icons on the outside of one of the chapels, we are thereby invited to consider what's happening within the chapel—invited to enter into the act of worship more properly, invited to taste and see. We are greeted by a welcoming acolyte who offers to shepherd us through the experience, but also has the wisdom to allow us to explore on our own terms. ...

After time spent focused and searching in what the faithful call "the racks," with our newfound holy object

in hand, we proceed to the altar, which is the consummation of worship. Behind the altar is the priest who presides over the consummating transaction. This is a religion of transaction, of exchange and communion. And so we make our sacrifice, leave our donation, but in return receive something with solidity that is wrapped in the colors and symbols of the saints and the season. Released by the priest with a benediction, we make our way out of the chapel ...—not necessarily to leave the temple, but rather to continue contemplation and be invited into another chapel. For who could resist the tangible realities of the good life so abundantly and invitingly offered?”

Last week, you reflected on the words of the song “What the world needs now is Love.”

Today, consider the charge of the great theologian Bruce Springsteen: “Everybody’s got a hungry heart.” I won’t ask you to sing it.

You are more than what you think. You are more than what you do. You are what you love, because your loves have the power to shape and orient you toward what you worship, and toward the kingdom you serve.



<sup>12</sup>As God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience. <sup>14</sup>Above all, clothe yourselves with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony.

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