

Exploring the Scriptures:  
The Love that will not let you go

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Micah 5:2 – 5a  
by Blair Odney

When I was a young tenor in the choir at Knox United Church, I often found myself saying, 'how did the preacher know what I was doing all week; was he following me?' There were so many times when I thought the minister was speaking directly to me and my experience. It's funny how that is. People often tell me that's their experience of my preaching. Truth is, it's what we bring to the words that are being said. It's the stories we tell, the lives we live, more than it is anything I might or might not say any Sunday.

Knox was the place where I felt completely at home. It was my social life, it was my spiritual life, and it was where I offered most of my volunteer time. I was loved and accepted. Heck, I was even ordained an elder at 21. As much as I've had wonderful experiences in other churches, including and especially here at Lynn Valley, Knox somehow still feels like home to me. For me it really was a place that wherever I was on my journey I was welcomed.

There was one woman in the choir. She had her hair coiffed every week in this died dark helmet and she wore blue eye shadow. She was as steely and brittle as anyone I've ever met and she usually made her opinions known five seconds after the service was over. I remember one morning we were making our way out of the choir loft, filing out in a single row through the tiny corridor that led to the choir loft. I think we were still within ear shot of the sanctuary when this woman's booming voice sailed over all of us. "Love, love, love....another sermon about love. Yuck!" Not missing a beat, my tenor seat mate who was following right behind muttered under his breath "she couldn't have been listening very carefully." All things human happen in the church.

On this fourth Sunday in Advent as we hold "love" in our collective hands, what is the word we would offer about it today? In this season of waiting? In the darkest time of the year? What do you know about love on this 4<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Advent? That's a real question, any thoughts? I'm thinking of Tina Turner's hit song "what's love got to do, got to do with it?" What does love have to do with anything anymore?

The prophet we know as Micah wrote about events occurring in about the 8<sup>th</sup> century before the Common Era; a time of great unrest in the northern kingdom of Judah and Jerusalem. The Assyrians to the north were exercising their tremendous political and military clout; there was no way the tribes of Israel would ever have the capacity to meet the Assyrians in battle, so Micah preached trust in Yahweh as the only response.

Micah's prophecy also railed against the social and moral abuse rampant in the land, especially with those with power: land and property rights had been stolen from the poor; widows had been evicted from their homes, in the market places, the scales used to measure weight were fixed to cheat customers, bribery was simply a matter of doing business, they were worshipping false God's and much more. Micah's language is graphic and brutal. Those who have everything, take from and abuse those who have little. And according to Micah, Yahweh is not happy and will not tolerate such disobedience. The ruin of Jerusalem and the holy Temple was in Israel's future.

This is what Micah is all about. Until we get to the little clip Myrna read for us this morning. Micah declares that out of one of the little tribes, a great and mighty ruler will ascend to power, bringing security. On this Sunday in Advent, Christians use the text to point to the long awaited Messiah of Christian theology.

Micah was not predicting a future Messiah. He was not suggesting that in 800 years, God would send the saviour of the world, the anointed one. Once again we have to leave Micah in his context and with what he knew. From Micah we remember "What does the Lord require of you, but to seek justice, love kindness and to walk humbly." When the country was deeply afraid of the awakening giant to the north, Micah says, trust in Yahweh who is justice, kindness and humility itself. The God who loves the littlest of those of the tribes of Judah still loves the faithful needy ones, who are everywhere. Micah believed this was a love that would not let him go.

Easy peasy, time to go home. Not so fast. Truth is, I'm not satisfied to hear that God loves me. That language no longer works for me. The great other we know as God, loves the worms that are us. When I hear that God loves me unconditionally, I also often hear a condition; as long as I love Jesus first and accept him as my personal lord and saviour. The language of the Christian church that puts God up there, out there, holy other, sets up what I like to call the Wizard of Oz God; the one that dispenses judgment and/or grace depending on the fervor of our prayers.

I have to say on most days, I'm a bit like Richard Dawkins – I'm really not sure that God exists. In fact, I believe there is a tyranny in that kind of God. It doesn't matter that that "other" God loves me, setting "him" up like that sets up conditions of love – if/then. It sets up a duality that perpetuates a separation from the creation, from each other, from ourselves. As long as God is doing the loving, the judging, the forgiving, the empowering, then I don't have to. As long as I accept Jesus as my Lord and Saviour, then I'm okay. I got me a ticket to heaven.

But incarnation, the one gift that Christians bring to the table of interfaith dialogue is about God indwelling. It's about being the beloved and owning our own belovedness. The incarnation about which we sing and celebrate, is about God's love being completely inert and ineffective unless it is embodied in us.

God doesn't love, until I do.

Now there's a love that will not let us go. It makes that love so much harder, and dare I say sometimes completely inaccessible. It's ours for the undertaking; we know it to be true. And we often fail so miserably. When we think of the those in our midst who might describe themselves as the littlest of the tribes of Judah, hearing and trusting in a God whose love is delivered through the perfect imperfection of human behaviour, well...no wonder we have violence. No wonder we have addictions. No wonder we have shootings. No wonder we have ghettoed people in the downtown eastside, or sleeping in tents in Mahon park.

But do you see what I see? What makes the season of Advent so remarkable is that in spite of our bad record of loving, love continues to be born, in us. That is the Advent hope, the Advent call, the Advent expectation. All earth is waiting expectantly, for us to love. And as we continue to claim our own belovedness, our capacity to meet that expectation grows. The Advent promise is that all earth, all life, all love, the holy mystery of the universe still trusts us to deliver. Yeah, it's another sermon about love. But it's not about God's love...it's about our being God's love for the healing of the world.

Oh holy child of Bethlehem, descend to us we pray  
Cast out our sin and enter in, be born in us today.  
We hear the Christmas angels, their great glad tidings tell  
Oh come to us, abide in us, Our Lord Emmanuel.

Amen.