

Lent 3B 2018

St. Brendan's Anglican Church

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Exodus 20:1-21, Psalm 19, Romans 7:12-25; John 2:13-22

On this third week of Lent, we continue along the path toward the cross on the way to becoming lovers. The path to Calvary is a path through the valley of death. It is a path of facing our need for healing and redemption as well as path to hope of salvation in Christ alone.

As I think about the word love in the world around us, I am forced to see the ambiguity and conflict inherent in the word. In our culture, it is difficult to know what people even mean by love. It is often reduced to physical attraction, intense passion, and sensual encounter. Recently, these simplistic ways of defining love have resulted accusations and assault. Many people now admit that what was called "free love" in the 1960s was really another way for men to take advantage of women.

What is love? How do I become a lover in a world where the very idea of love is clouded? at various points in history, we can see how this word is misused, absent, or twist. From the seductive medieval chivalric poetry to the oppression in ancient Greece to the a world of control in Biblical Egypt, we see a world where humans relations are often out of order.

In our Exodus reading today, the Lord has supernaturally rescued the Hebrews from the grip of Egyptian enslavement and is bringing them into a land of future promise. From Mt. Sinai the Lord speaks, instructs, gives His people the gift of Torah.

"I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery." (Ex 20:2). He teaches them that love has an order: the Lord loves us, we trust and obey the Lord, we love one another. In the Decalog we heard today, he reveals the shape of love. What does love look like in relation to God? No other gods, no false images, honor the name, keep the Sabbath. What does look like in relation to family and friends? Honor parents, no murder, no adultery, no stealing, no false witness, no coveting. These simple prohibitions make room for a world of positive relations between husbands and wives, children and parents, and siblings. They also expand to encompass all forms of authority, business and governmental relations, friendships, colleagues, and even treatment of animals, servants, and sojourners.

Throughout the Old Testament, these instructions will be developed to address specific situations while also teaching the people and us about how love takes shapes in action. When we get to the New Testament the extensive code will be reduced to two commands: love God and love one another. The Sermon on the Mount should make it clear that the command to love God and one another is not rooted in feelings or desires or longings, but in concrete behavior as well as in thoughts. We are called to love God and one another in thoughts, word, and deed. But we still fall short.

Paul writes, “For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I keep on doing” (Romans 7:19–20). When we hear the word evil, we may want to focus on some horrid thoughts or actions, some controlling sin. It is true that the human heart is capable of all sorts of evil. Today as we think about the call to become lovers, as we think about the Great Commandment, I want us to consider how the failure of love is ultimately evil.

I want to love God and love the people. I want to love my family, my friends, and the world around. If I am honest, I fall short. Now it is hard for me to think about how falling short of love is evil. I want to soften my inability to live into love. I want to soften my own selfishness, self worship. I have difficulty confessing my own evil ways.

Peter Kreeft writes, “The saints sometimes say this: I am nothing. Thus God said to Thérèse of Lisieux: “I am he who is and you are she who is not.” He continues, “The closer you get to God the more you see this. Those who scorn God think they are Number One. Those who have conventional ideas of God think they are ‘good people.’ ... Those who begin to pray find that compared with God they are dust motes in the sun. And finally, saints say they are nothing—or else in the Apostle Paul’s words, “the foremost of sinners” (1 Tim 1:15). Sinners think they are saints and saints think they are sinners.”¹

One moment I can tell my wife that I love her, and in the very next moment become offended, turned away, angry. One moment I can express love and devotion for my parents and the very next moment lie directly to their faces. I can tell my family I love them, but make decisions that consistently put work, hobbies, friendships, or even ministry in front of my family.

I can consistently act in ways that demonstrate my confession of love is thin. I do not do what I want to do. Augustine calls our sin, our evil, disordered love. The love of God and of others is corrupted. Desire for self, for delight, for protection, for self glory triumphs. Soon I am living and loving according to my own rules. This is the ultimately tyranny. My desire and my way trumps all other desires. This is the beginning of using people. Missing people. Hurting people. Oppressing people. Destroying God’s world. It is the beginning of embezzling millions of dollars, of stealing the retirement from my employees, of seducing men and women for selfish desire, of turning a blind eye to the needs of the world, and destroying anyone who gets in my way.

Years ago, the film “Winter Bones” told the story of a family caught in the grip of meth trade. They kill one of the sons and soon threaten to kill his daughter for threatening the trade. The bonds of family lost, the whole clan is reduced to savage behavior to protect their evil.

Currently, the film “Annihilation” tells a strange, mysterious story of alien invasion. There are no creatures with ships and firing guns. Instead, an expanding portion of land is infected, transformed by new cell formations. This area is called the shimmer. Team after team of soldiers

¹ Peter Kreeft, *The God Who Loves You* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2004), 68.

enter the shimmer and fall to return. Scientist and soldiers alike are fascinated and terrified. Without giving too much away, it appears that the great threat within the shimmer is ourselves. It simply reflects who we are back into the world around us.

Think of that in light of Romans 7. Our fears, our lusts, our angry thoughts, our resentments, our jealousies...all reflected back in the world around us. What a terrifying thought! Now we might catch a glimpse of why disordered love is evil, corrupt, a threat to the stability of all creation. Paul does not leave us in our disordered love in Romans 7, but continues in chapter 8 with the hope of the Spirit revealed in Christ. “If the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, he who raised Christ Jesus from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies through his Spirit who dwells in you.” (Ro 8:11).

The Spirit is leading us into the “freedom of the glory of the children of God” (Ro 8:21). What is this freedom? It is the freedom of living in the love of God and the freedom of living through the love of God. Paul reminds us that nothing can separate us from this love:

³⁸ For I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, ³⁹ nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. Ro 8:38–39.

By the Spirit, we are growing up into love. We are growing up into the fullness of the Decalog, the Commandments, the embodiment of love. We are growing up into the fruit of the Spirit: But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, ²³ gentleness, self-control; against such things there is no law. Ga 5:22–24.

The only thing that counts for anything is “faith expressing itself through love.” (Galatians 5:6) This is the gift we’ve been given and the gift we have to give. While in this age, we live in a world of struggle and confusion. We live in a world of Romans 7 where many people fail to do the good they know to do. It is in this world, where we will get offended with one another and with those in public and those overseas, that we must learn to live in the Spirit of Romans 8.

This ultimately means that we live in a place of returning again and again to the cry for “Mercy!” “Lord make haste to help me!” By soaking in the Word of God, we begin to fill our imagination with the shape of love. From the Sermon on the Mount to the Good Samaritan to Paul’s letters. In many of Paul’s letters, he ends with practical pictures of what a life of love looks like:

Romans 12 exhorts us to pour out our gifts in service to one another as an act of worship to God. 1 Corinthians 13 tells us that love takes the shape of patience, kindness, truth, endurance, hope. It is not free from arrogance, envy, boasting, jealousies, irritability, resentment, or rudeness. As we continue through these letters, we see that it looks like honoring one another, submitting to one another, laying down our lives for one another, restoring one another, and thinking the very best of one another.

There is not a technique to loving. It is a fruit of the Spirit. Again and again, we are turning to the Lord in our weakness, failure, angry thoughtful, improper desires, unforgiving hearts, and asking for mercy.

We return to the simple message of the Gospel. Jesus has come on a mission of love: for God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son. He redeems us and calls us to repent, to turn away from our sin and follow Him. As we follow Him, we are learning learn to live in the reality of His love.² Yes, we fall and fail short. But we continue to turn to Him the author and finisher of our faith. We come as weak and weary sinners, knowing that He loves and His love is what will grow up into fruit that will heal the nations.

² In order to come to the love of God, we must begin by loving our neighbors. Although love of God comes first in the order of commanding (*ordo praecipendi*), love of neighbor comes first in the order of performing (*ordo faciendi*) (s. 265.8.9; *Jo. ev. tr.* 17.8). In this way there is a temporary primacy of love of neighbor; that is, in our life on earth authentic love of neighbor is the first realization of our love of God. This is not a denial of the absolute difference between God and the human being, for they remain *aliud et aliud*.... Since love is not complete except in the two precepts of love for God and neighbor, why does Paul in both Galatians and Romans mention only love of neighbor? Is not the reason that love for God is not so frequently put to the test, and people can deceive themselves about it? Regarding love for neighbor, however, they can more easily be convinced that they do not have love for God, when they act unjustly toward other people.... Therefore, since both precepts are such that neither can be kept without the other, it is normally sufficient to mention just one of them, when it is a matter of the works of justice. But the precept of love for neighbor is more appropriate, for by that a person is made aware of his shortcomings.... Some of the Galatians were deceiving themselves thinking they had love for God. They were shown clearly that they did not have it because of the hatred among the brothers, about which it was easy to judge in daily life and conduct. (ex. *Gal.* 45; *ep. Jo.* 8.4; *Trin.* 8.8.12). From Tarsicius J. van Bavel, "Love," ed. Allan D. Fitzgerald, *Augustine through the Ages: An Encyclopedia* (Grand Rapids, MI; Cambridge, U.K.: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1999), 512.