

Homily – Love, Love, Love

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One of the songs I remember as a child is:

Love, love, love. That's what it's all about.
Cause God loves us, we love each other.
Mother, father, sister, brother,
Everybody sing and shout, cause that what it's all about.
It's about Love, love, love.

And then there is the Beatles song "all you need is love."

Or Elvis Presely's "Can't Help Falling in Love."

Or Whitney Houston's "I will always love you."

Last week Julie shared some bumper sticker sayings in her sermon. Here are some love bumper stickers.

You are worthy of so much love.

Make love not war.

I heart New York

And finally, Love is love.

Love is the theme of many of Jesus' teachings, and it is what we hear from Jesus in his Great Commandment that we heard in this morning's Gospel reading. Jesus says "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.... And, you shall love your neighbor as yourself."

God and love. Love and God. It is this linking of God and love that have become a central part of my personal theology. I would go so far as to say that God is love. So this morning, I want to focus on love, and, to do that here is a Christian framework of love that is helpful to me, and I hope it is for you as well. I have shared this many times before.

First, God loves. That is the first part of this helpful framework. God loves.

Second, we respond to God's love in one of those three-legged stools. As Episcopalians, we like to explain things in threes and this construct is a three-legged stool of love. We are to love God, we are to love others and we are to love ourselves. We have all heard people say that you can't really love God if you do not also love your neighbor. I think this is true. I think our ability to love other people directly impacts our ability to love God. Loving God and loving others are related.

But, there aren't just two legs. We also need to love ourselves. I don't think you can effectively love God or love others if you don't also love yourself. A lot of people dismiss the idea of loving self because they think it ignores God's love for us. They think the self-esteem movement has gone too far such that self-esteem means over reliance on self and elimination of God. There are times that this happens, but this does not mean we throw the baby out with the bath water. Self-esteem is still important. We need to allow ourselves to be the beloved of God. God loves us so we should also love ourselves. Much of the ineffectiveness we have in loving God and loving others is because we don't also love ourselves.

Fifteen hundred years ago, Saint Augustine wrote about love. And, he assumed that all people love themselves. As a gay man, my experience has been quite different. When you are taught that being gay is sub-human, it is hard to love yourself. For years the messages from society and even from the church have been damaging to so many.

Women are worth less than men. Damaging to self.
LGBTQ are worth less than straight folks. Damaging to self.
One race is worth less than another. Damaging to self.
Poor folks are worth less than rich folks.
Introverts are worth less than extraverts.
Only beautiful, funny, articulate, normal people are worth anything.

Over and over we have messages that are damaging to self. Our churches must examine themselves and repent of those damaging ways. And not just those other churches for we must do this work ourselves.

As Christians and as a Church, we need to encourage people to respond to God's love in three ways, not just one or two. Many of us here today come from a variety of other Christian traditions, and we all know of churches that emphasize only one of these responses to the love of God. Sometimes, a church focuses only on loving God. Sometimes, a church ignores love of God and only focusing on loving others. As Christians and as a Church we need to focus on all three. We need to love God back, we need to love others because God loves them, and we need to love ourselves because we too are the beloved of God.

And, over the years I have learned to add a fourth dimension or way that we are to love. Even though it is not part of the Great Commandment, the Bible shows us over and over, that God also loves all of creation. The moon, the stars, the birds, and the trees are all the beloved of God. So, since God love creation, we are to love creation as well.

On Friday night, Jeff and I went to the Performing Arts Center to see the Cal Poly theater department's production of Shakespeare's "A Mid-Summers Night Dream." Our Choral Scholar Wyatt is absent for two Sundays because he is one of the leads in this production, and he is quite good in it. I recommend that you go today or next weekend to see it. Be that as it may, one of the themes of the play is love. Love can be irrational. Love can be unpredictable. Love often transforms people into fools. And love can be wonderful. As Shakespeare shows us, love can be quite complicated. Love has a lot of nuance and depth to it.

When I was in business school one of my classmates went home to India for the summer where his family had setup an arranged marriage. Here in the west we commonly love a person before we marry them, but in many cultures throughout the centuries the marriage begins before love grows. I am intrigued by this process where we grow to love a person. It certainly fits in with my life experience that shows love is not static. It changes over the decades. I think we all know that love is not like the Hallmark cards. It is not like the storybook romance where they just "lived happily ever after." Love is not just a warm and fuzzy feeling that two people have between them. It is a commitment, and can even be a sacrifice in which a person gets outside of themselves and their own needs and desires. It is a letting go of the ego for the benefit of another. Love is also allowing ourselves to vulnerable.

In my own life, being a single parent took a lot of love. People used to ask me if being a single parent was hard, but to me the questions didn't make much sense. There was no evaluation of whether it was hard or easy. You just did what you needed to do. There was juggling. Sometimes I didn't get to do what I wanted. For me it seems like love doesn't evaluate. Love just does what needs to be done. And I'm guessing that many of you have had this experience as well. I see it in my daughter and her husband as they share this same type of selfless love with their children.

To unpack this type of love further, I want to share two stories. The first is from the Old Testament Book of Ruth. This book tells the story of a loyal Moabite widow named Ruth who follows her mother-in-law, Naomi, back to Bethlehem after family tragedies strike. In Bethlehem, Ruth gathers grain in the fields of a wealthy relative named Boaz, who acts as a "kinsman-redeemer" by showing her immense kindness and eventually marrying her. Their union restores Naomi's hope and produces a son,

Obed, placing Ruth in the ancestral lineage of King David and Jesus. This book of the Bible is an ancient story of love and commitment, first the love of Naomi and Ruth and then the love of Ruth and Boaz, and then their love for their son, Obed.

The second story that I want to share is not from an ancient book for it was written in Japan in 1972. Here is a summary of “The Twilight Years” by Ariyoshi Sawako.

The story is about Akiko, a married woman in a suburb of Tokyo who is forced to juggle her day job and the care of her father-in-law, Shigezo. Throughout the years, Shigezo has been cruel and verbally abusive to his daughter-in-law, but as he grows senile, Akiko is one of the few people he still recognizes, and she is forced into the role of caretaker. Her husband is of little help. She must bathe Shigezo and help him in the bathroom. She must comfort him when he acts like a frightened child, and find him when he wanders out of the house. Akiko is exhausted, frustrated and sometimes angry with her husband and father-in-law, however when Shigezo comes down with pneumonia, Akiko gives up her job to care for him full time. Shigezo recovers but has a remarkable change in demeanor. His illness seems to have brought him a kind of spiritual calm, acceptance, and happiness, and Akiko finds herself settling into her new life. “The Twilight Years” is a novel of development in which the protagonist assumes the unpleasant, frustrating, and exhausting responsibility of caring for a senile elderly man whom she has never liked, and in the process, achieves a sense of communion, love, and spiritual fulfillment in their relationship. Had Shigezo been placed in a nursing home, Akiko’s personal development would never have occurred.

This is a story that should resonated with many of you, because you have lived it. Or, if you haven’t lived it yet, you may be blessed to live it in the future. This is a story of real love, not the storybook kind. I am convinced that as Akiko was able to grow in her love for her father-in-law, then she also grew in her love for herself and in her love for God. This is who Jesus wants us to be when he gives us the Great Commandment. Selfless love is not limited to parents and children, and it is not limited to the beginning of life or the end of life. It comes throughout our lifetime. And, sometimes we are the giver of that love and sometimes we are the receiver.

Love, love, love, that’s what it’s all about. Love God, love others, love yourself, and love the rest of non-human creation. God created you in love, and God created you for love.