

You Asked for It: What's Love Got to Do with It?
A Sermon by Louise Westfall
Fairmount Presbyterian Church
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Text: I Corinthians 13

My son learned very quickly to answer the inevitable Sunday dinner question, "So what was the church school lesson about today?" with one of two answers: "God" or "love." What his response lacked in specificity was more than made up for in Big Picture understanding. After all, what is more important than God, or more essential to Christian faith than love? After a summer of sermon requests about fundamentalism, politics from the pulpit, immigration, homosexuality, I was cheered by the possibility of a subject about which everyone agrees. "Love" seemed like a safe bet. Whew!

Oh, if it were only so! The Fairmount member who chose this topic did so precisely because of the confusion surrounding it, and the disconnect he's observed between professed love of God and love (or lack thereof) of neighbor. The polarized U.S. political landscape comes to mind immediately, with its appeals to religious faith, yet virtual absence of positive regard extended to those who disagree. Division in the mainline churches, including the Presbyterian Church, also seems to illustrate the struggle to love and remain together.

The Fairmount member continued: *Did the members of the Dutch Reformed Church in South Africa practice Christian love in forcing apartheid on the blacks? Could the American owners of African slaves ever practice Christian love toward them? Did Americans practice Christian love toward Chinese laborers forced to build the Union Pacific Railroad under inhuman conditions? Did Americans practice Christian love in refusing to accept boatloads of Jewish refugees fleeing Nazi persecution? Christian missionaries were active abroad proselytizing, while few of the converts could expect equal respect and justice in their spiritual beneficiaries' homeland.* On a personal scale, how does a Christian understanding of

love affect marriage and family relationships in a time when these seem so fragile and in flux? These questions prompted the church member to ask for a clear and coherent explication of the concept of Christian love and its implications for human relationships in the different forms they take: parental love, familial love, neighborly love, romantic love, love between enemies, and love reflected in social ethics, law, and politics. (As far as I can tell the only love he overlooked was the love of the congregation toward their preacher when she gets them out in an hour.)

This is a topic worth considering, for it comprises the most important commands of the Judeo-Christian tradition: *You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might [Deuteronomy 6:5], and You shall love your neighbor as yourself [Matthew 19:19].* What's love got to do with it? Jesus said everything hinges on these two commandments. To the extent that we miss either of them, we miss the point of faith all together.

My son was partly right: the Bible has a lot to say about love, and I can't imagine a Sunday School lesson that doesn't include it, however obliquely. But I wonder if his cheerfully casual assessment might not obscure the essence of a Christian concept of love, one that is so much more than a safe bet on a summer Sunday. The text is from a summary of Jesus' teachings, in which he contrasts the vision of the Kingdom of God with that of conventional religious practice. *You've heard it said 'love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' But I say to you, love your enemies, and pray for those who persecute you.*

Once again Jesus takes the concept to a higher level. Listen for God's word to the church and to you in the reading from the gospel according to Luke, in the 6th chapter at the 27th verse (p. 64 of the chapel/pew Bibles): [LUKE 6:27-36]

I was fascinated to read that neurological research reveals that revenge feels good. In studies, subjects were shown videos that set up situations in which actors used clever means to get

back at persons who had hurt them. The subject's brain activity was monitored, and recorded stimulation to the brain's pleasure zones along with endorphin release during the revenge scenes. Perhaps this served an evolutionary purpose, providing motivation for righting wrongs and protecting a community's interests. I'm not a neurologist, and perhaps my layperson's understanding of the studies misreads them all together, but my point is that love—in its Christian form—counters our innate ways of being and doing. The drive to procreate, the instinct to nurture and protect our young, the need to form community and kinship groups all make sense. The directive to love one's enemies, to do good to the poor (that is, to those from whom there is no quid pro quo), and to extend mercy rather than revenge, do not.

Christian love is not a biological necessity. It has little to do with feelings of tenderness or affection. It is an act of will, exercised for another's good. I think this quotation from author M. Scott Peck expresses the truth of Christian love so well, I ask couples to reflect upon it during premarital counseling: *Love is the intentional commitment to extend oneself on behalf of another's spiritual growth.* I'm pretty sure he wasn't talking about trying to convince someone that you're right about God, but rather to promote their growth as a full human being, mind, body, spirit. Let the meaning of this sink in for a moment. To love another means to make a commitment to their well-being, and to work on their behalf, even at a cost to the self. Of course loving like this takes all kinds of forms, relative to the situation. The apostle Paul gave us some examples in his first letter to the Corinthian churches, congregations that disagreed passionately about church practice and belief. Curiously, he uses as many phrases to say what love is *not*, as he does to say what it is. Love *isn't* envious, boastful, arrogant or rude. It doesn't insist on its own way. It isn't irritable; it doesn't take a certain satisfaction in the misfortunes of others. Rather, love is patient, kind, hopeful, and enduring. Sometimes it will take the form of "tough love" -- in those situations when a person does not understand or will not accept what is necessary for their well-

being. Families or individuals who have confronted loved ones with a drug or alcohol problem or mental health issues have acted in love, even though it triggered anger and even rejection by the one they love. Sometimes love takes very concrete forms, such as shelter for homeless persons and food for hungry persons, financial gifts to communities reeling from storms or warfare. The Fisher family is very grateful for the outpouring of this community's support following Greg's accident in Canada last week, through e-mails and prayers, food, notes. Our prayer shawl ministry is a labor of love in which members hand-knit colorful shawls of soft yarn which are given so that people in difficult circumstances of illness or loss may literally feel the compassionate embrace and prayers of this congregation.

And sometimes, love is not "nice." The prophets from Amos and Isaiah to Martin Luther King and Marian Wright Edelman have shown the side of love that calls out injustice, and alerts communities to their true condition. Love without truth quickly decays into sentimentality, a toothless version of itself. We cannot love the poor, for example, without considering the ways our society is structured that make or keep them so. In service to love, we'll examine those structures and seek appropriate changes. Love is expressed in the social and political realm as justice, and a recognition that all people are God's people, and deserve to be treated with fairness and respect.

Jesus not only deepened the meaning of love, he also widened the context for love, by including those who cannot or will not love in return. Enemies; poor persons; children (as in, everyone else's as well as your own, the one who kicks the back of your airline seat non-stop for 2 ½ hours accompanied by incessant whining; not that I noticed). A friend swears his only creed is "Jesus loves the little children; all the children of the world"-and that's not far off. On one level, to love all those people comprises an impossible commandment. But it reminds us yet again that Christian love is not transactional; it does not demand or depend upon a response from the one

who is loved. And like any other skill you want to do well, love must be practiced. To learn to love, there's no substitute for loving. I don't know of anyone who loves their enemies naturally.

I want to offer two examples of love I've encountered recently, in hopes that they keep this sermon from being only a bloodless discourse. Someone has concluded that we learn love by the kind of love we've received, so here are some good teachers.

A neighbor recently told me about the joy she's received from visiting an elderly, housebound neighbor. I immediately connected this to the enjoyable relationships I've had over the years with sharp, articulate "senior citizens" whose observations reflect wisdom and insight honed through years of experience. "Well, it's not quite like that," she admitted. "My neighbor is blind, hard of hearing, incontinent, and frequently confused." Seeing my astonishment, this friend added simply, "she appreciates the attention, and that's something I can give." *If you love only those who are of use to you, what good is that? To make a difference in the world, love, expecting nothing in return....and receiving everything.*

Barack Obama was elected to the United States Senate after bursting onto the national scene with a riveting keynote speech at the 2004 Democratic National Convention. Earlier this summer he was invited to speak to a gathering of people of faith addressing issues of poverty and justice. When he took the podium, he acknowledged that his faith likewise called him to care for the poor. But he chose instead to talk about the connection between religion and politics and how to break through the bitterness and mutual suspicion dividing the nation, about how to reconcile faith with a pluralistic democracy. Obama told of an e-mail he received during the senate race, from a doctor who described himself as a Christian whose faith led him to strong opposition to abortion. However, he wasn't writing to challenge Obama's pro-choice perspective, but something larger. He had read a statement on

Obama's campaign website which suggested he would fight "right-wing ideologues who want to take away a woman's right to choose." He went on to write: I sense that you have a passion for justice and are a fair minded person. Whatever your convictions, if you truly believe that those who oppose abortion are all ideologues driven by perverse desires to inflict suffering on women, then you, in my judgment, are not fair-minded. . . .I do not ask at this point that you oppose abortion, only that you speak about this issue in fair-minded words.

The e-mail flashed like a light bulb in Obama's mind. He realized that doctor reflected many, many people who are willing to listen and learn from those who are willing to speak in reasonable terms—those who know of the central place God holds for so many, and who refuse to treat faith as simply another political issue with which to score points. He wrote back to the doctor and thanked him for his advice. He changed the language on his website to state in clear, non-inflammatory terms his pro-choice position. And then, Obama says, he prayed that he might extend the same presumption of good faith to others that the doctor had extended to him.

Friends, this is the love that really will make a difference: as simple –and as difficult!—as "doing to others as you would have them do to you." We have the opportunity to practice Christian love in a particular context this Fall. The Outreach Ministry Council of our church recently asked the Session to endorse a November ballot initiative that would raise the minimum wage in Ohio. They argued that such a raise would lift some Ohioans out of poverty and give them a shot to provide for their families. They believe this initiative reflects the biblical mandate to care for the poor. The Session tabled a vote on the matter, for the express purpose of engaging the congregation more fully on the matter. Fairmount members represent a broad range of perspectives, along a wide political spectrum, and sometimes we forget that. As we discuss this particular initiative, can we extend the presumption of good faith to one another? Can we learn from one another out of our differences? The pagan Roman world marveled at the

first century church: see how they love one another! Will the same be said of us?

Love one another. It's a tall order, but there's one thing about the Christian gospel. God never commands without providing the means to obey that command. Friends, we can learn to love, because we have first been so perfectly loved. God's grace is the gift that animates our loving. Jesus walked that way, and we have only to follow. May it be so!

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