

“Learning To Love... Again”

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To the reader: This sermon was only part of a service of worship with many components working together, all of which were designed to be experienced in a community context. In our "free pulpit" tradition, its concepts are intended not as truths to receive, but as spurs to your own thought and faith.

“Learning To Love...Again”

READINGS

Intro

This morning we continue our observation and celebration of the season of Advent with the theme of Love. Our first reading this morning comes to us from the Christian scriptures

Reading 1 – Matthew 5:43-48 (The Message)

"You're familiar with the old written law, 'Love your friend,' and its unwritten companion, 'Hate your enemy.' I'm challenging that. I'm telling you to love your enemies. Let them bring out the best in you, not the worst. When someone gives you a hard time, respond with the energies of prayer, for then you are working out of your true selves, your God-created selves. This is what God does. He gives his best—the sun to warm and the rain to nourish—to everyone, regardless: the good and bad, the nice and nasty. If all you do is love the lovable, do you expect a bonus? Anybody can do that. If you simply say hello to those who greet you, do you expect a medal? Any run-of-the-mill sinner does that.

"In a word, what I'm saying is, Grow up. You're kingdom subjects. Now live like it. Live out your God-created identity. Live generously and graciously toward others, the way God lives toward you."

Reading 2 – To Love Without Holding – Marge Piercy¹

Our second reading this morning comes to us from the modern poet, Marge Piercy, and is entitled "To Love Without Holding."

Learning to love differently is hard,
love with the hands wide open, love
with the doors banging on their hinges,
the cupboard unlocked, the wind
roaring and whimpering in the rooms
rustling the sheets and snapping the blinds
that thwack like rubber bands
in an open palm.

¹ as found in *Cries of the Spirit*. M. Sewell (ed). Beacon Press: Boston, MA. 1991. (pp. 43-4).

It hurts to love wide open
stretching the muscles that feel
as if they are made of wet plaster,
then of blunt knives, then
of sharp knives.

It hurts to thwart the reflexes
of grab, and clutch; to love and let
go again and again. It pesters to remember
the lover who is not in bed,
to hold back what is owed to the work
that gutters like a candle in a cave
without air, to love consciously,
conscientiously, concretely, constructively.

I can't do it, you say it's killing
me, but you thrive, you glow
on the street like a neon raspberry,
you float and sail, a helium balloon
bright bachelor's button blue and bobbing

on the cold and hot winds of our breath,
as we make and unmake in passionate
diastole and systole the rhythm
of our unbound bonding, to have
and not to hold, to love
with minimized malice, hunger
and anger moment by moment balanced.

* * * * *

SERMON

Love wins.

Have you seen those bumper stickers?

Simple. Direct. Bold.

Love wins.

I started seeing them while I was living in Chicago, before moving here to Grand Rapids this fall. Driving along or, more frequently, creeping along in

Chicago traffic my eye would be captured by those two words on the bumper in front of me.

Love wins.

My partner, Chad, and I decided this would be a good slogan – wary as we are of bumper-sticker philosophical jingoism. But where to get one?

I finally found myself in a situation where I could ask someone. A few weeks back we were sitting at an ATM near our home in East Hills, waiting our turn while those in the car in front of us completed their financial transaction.

“Look!” we noted to each other, “they’ve got one of those bumper stickers!”

Inspired in the moment and emboldened by the fact we were sitting still anyway, I got out of our car and asked the folks in front of us where they’d gotten their sticker. “At our church” they replied.

“Our church” turned out to be one of our more evangelical cousins in the faith community. “*They* think love wins?” we mused to each other. Certainly what *they* mean can’t be the same as what *we* mean when we say love wins...can it?”

We found ourselves face to face with the next questions:

“**Whose** love?”

“**Which** love?”

And what does it mean “to win”?

Are we talking about love of country, here? Love of family? Love of money? Love of God?

And how do we *learn* ourselves into that love? That love that wins?

Well, I don’t know about you, but I learned to love first from my parents. I learned that love is about taking care of each other. I learned that love meant accepting orders and having a burning appreciation for country. I also learned that love keeps secrets and holds grudges. According to the little cartoon hand towels in our bathroom I learned that “love is never having to say you’re sorry.”

Is *that* the love that wins?

Later from my peers in school and from teachers and other adults I learned that love means judgment and competition at some times and cooperation and collaboration at others. I learned that love meant keeping the peace as well as not throwing off the grading curve. I learned that love meant not standing out too much. I learned that love sometimes has to do things which require the explanations, "this is for your own good" and "you'll thank me for this later."

Is *that* the love that wins?

Still later, from my first long-term romance as an adult, I learned that love meant forgiving, meant coming back to the table after a conflict...meant telling the truth even when it's scary...And now, recently engaged to my current partner, I am learning that love also means taking chances...again...being willing to be vulnerable...putting something and someone besides myself first. A bigger love. A love for justice. A love that means speaking difficult truths to power.

My love isn't perfect yet...it may never be. But I'm learning...

The advent of love, the love whose coming or arrival we seek this day is an ever deepening, ever expanding, ever widening circle of care. And it's not easy. It's not simple. Not nearly as simple as "love wins".

As Marge Piercy wrote in our reading this morning, this kind of love hurts...it pesters and stretches us to seek it and practice it. And yet, when we do...when we can...we glow...we thrive...we float and sail. The love that wins does not do *away* with anger and hunger, with malice...but minimizes it...balances it...Learning to love differently is hard...but the good news is that the capacity is *in* us!

To put it another way, Jesus is quoted as saying, "Grow up. You're kingdom subjects. Now live like it. Live out your God-created identity. Live generously and graciously toward others, the way God lives toward you."

It's in our DNA.

It may seem to be a recessive gene at times, depending on your company and your circumstances. But it's there!

And our task is to uncover it...and to live it out.

"I can't do it," you say, "it's killing me..."

But you can

You already have

You just have to remember it
recollect it

and repeat it

Get back into that space of accepting another without clinging

Get back into that space of being *curious* about folks around you, rather than merely assuming you know them...

This Advent season reminds us of the pregnant possibilities of each and every day...and of each and every one of us. If we but seek it...

The French priest and poet, Michael Quoist², put it this way:

'I want to love, Lord,
I need to love.
All my being is desire;
My heart,
My body,
Yearn in the night towards an unknown one to love.

My arms thrash about and I can seize on no object for my love.
I am alone and want to be two.
I speak, and no one there to listen.
I live, and no one is there to share my life.

Why be so rich and have no one to enrich?
Where does this love come from?
Where is it going?
I want to love, Lord,
I need love.

Here this evening, Lord, is all my love unused'.

Just imagine all of the unused love in this room...

All of the unused love.

² as quoted in Wilkinson, Helena. (1995). *Beyond Singleness*. Marshall Pickering (first ed).

In my most recent ministry before coming here to Grand Rapids, I worked in a hospital as a chaplain. One of my favorite things about being there was that we were *all* learners. Oh, sure, there were experts...oncologists, neonatologists, nurse practitioners...but we were all learning, too...especially when taking into consideration that it was a university medical center, complete with nursing students, med school students, residents...even most of us chaplains were students.

And more than anything else, I was there to learn to love again. I was there to learn to set aside my prejudices, my previous experiences, my assumptions...to acknowledge them, yes, to understand them...and then to set them aside as best as I could as I entered each hospital room so that I could be a presence of love for that family, that patient, that care team...my job was to love. How cool was that?!

Easy?

No. Not always.

But worthwhile.

Fred has been casting a vision for this church as a school for the soul. And if that is to be true, then I believe one of the most important lessons for us to learn is to love...and in order for that to happen, we have to learn to open ourselves...to, as one minister put it "stretch our hearts enough to lose their littleness."

It is the first step, I believe, of freeing the mind, growing the soul and changing the world.

We must learn to love...again...and again...and again

Despite being wounded by past love

Despite being cynical...jaded...

We must continue to question, yes...

"Whose love?"

But we must never cease from the searching.

That is what I am learning about how to love now.

Will you learn with me?

Will you open your hearts...open your eyes...open yourselves...to the beauty all around you and to the love within you?

Will you take small steps?

Maybe try talking to a stranger during coffee hour? Talking to a child?

Maybe forgive your spouse...your parent...for an injury?

Maybe take some time in the next week to tend to your own weary self?

Maybe speak a prayer for peace *first* the next time you hear a politico with whom you disagree?

There are so many ways we can work towards learning to love again.

The good news is, it's in us already.

The bad news is...it may be covered over with bitterness, pain and fear.

But it's there!

The advent of love...the birthing...the coming forth...

The good news is, the world needs what is inside of you...

not to suck you dry

not to drain you

but to complete the beauty of creation

Your love...and yours...and yours...and mine...they're all necessary

And they're all...right here...