

öLove to Surviveö  
Ruth 1: 1 ö 18      Mark 12: 28 ö 34  
Rev. Wayne E. Gustafson, D.Min.  
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Last May I preached a sermon about love. The summary of that sermon is also a reasonable summary of the whole Gospel of Jesus. This will be on the test, so pay attention: **God is love, you are commanded to express the reality of God in love, and here's what it looks like when you do it in daily life.**

I could simply leave it there, but I have a further interest in the topic. Why would love be the central command of Christianity? The curious kid in me can't stoop asking öWhy?ö

I argued in the previous sermon that because Love is a natural and healthy process, that's enough reason for us to promote its practical presence in our lives. But that still doesn't tell us why love is so central to Jesus' life and teaching. There are those who would say that service or obedience or moral behavior possess equally important claims to center stage.

Might we be more motivated to pursue love in practical ways if we understood how truly significant it is for our well-being. So, making use of a modern scientific perspective, here goes.

I think we can agree that everything that lives goes through a process of growth and even transformation, but from a most practical perspective, we can argue the survival of the entire species appears to be even more important than the survival of any individual. Some who base their thinking in a radically scientific model might conclude that the propagation of the species is the only reality that even matters ö that the rest of what passes for human culture is simply window dressing that doesn't add up to anything of significance in the long run.

On the surface, it appears that there is much in evolutionary biology and even in religion that identifies survival of the species by the elimination or domination of any competitors as the prime directive. But it turns out that there is more to the story. We are now learning that at least cooperation, if not love, is also essential to the process. Furthermore, diversity in an ecosystem, even when particular elements appear, on the surface, to be enemies, is necessary for resilience. And resilience is necessary for the survival of the system as a whole.

Because our present world-wide collective consciousness has elevated the importance of competition, domination, and winning to such heights, we actually have created a situation that threatens to destroy us all, friend and enemy alike.

I would suggest to you that we can no longer afford the belief that the destruction of enemies and competitors is in the best interest of our survival. Forms of that belief have dominated business, government, and even religion for too long. The stakes have become too high and we cannot accomplish the domination or annihilation of the other without destroying ourselves in the process.

Jesus weighs in on this issue in a way that seemed then, and still seems to us a bit naïve, if not bizarre.

Hear these words of Jesus as found in the Gospel of Matthew:

You have heard that it was said, "You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy." But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of your Father in heaven; for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous. For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax-collectors do the same? And if you greet only your brothers and sisters, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same? Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.

Do you think Jesus gave us this expanded law of love just so we could become better than the Gentiles or the tax collectors? It can seem that way until we get to the last sentence: Be ye perfect, therefore, as your heavenly father is perfect.

I must digress to explain that in this context, perfect doesn't mean to be highly moral or to have the correct answers to life's problems. It means to be full, ripe, mature. And it is related to the religious notion of salvation when to be saved is understood as the health and well being of individual and group alike. Jesus calls us to look at life and morality from a divine perspective. Jesus described a God who cares about all creation. One might say that in God's perfection, there are no mortal enemies. All are neighbors, everyone matters, and all people must work together in order for creation to be healthy. Consider what our world might look like if we all believed that and acted on our belief.

Now, let me point out that competition is not bad in and of itself. It only becomes lethal when winning becomes the only thing that matters. Healthy competition can help us learn, grow, and develop needed systemic defenses. But without the balance of love and cooperation, competition turns cancerous. In professional sports, we have seen the deterioration of ethics when competitors believe that they must do anything, even those things that will damage their physical and emotional well-being in the long run. These behaviors are ultimately destructive.

I invite you to consider the world situation, where fear, hatred, suspicion, and extreme competition have created a world increasingly threatened by not only violence, but by total destruction. The level of our destructive behavior is only possible if we convince ourselves that others don't matter as much as we do. It is only possible to kill others if we make them into objects that have no intrinsic right to exist. Even worse, when we make our enemies into the embodiment of evil, then we justify our own evil destructiveness towards them.

What greater monument to fear could there be than the existence of nuclear weapons. They not only threaten the "enemy," but they threaten to annihilate the ability of our planet to support life. When we look closely, we see that those weapons are just the most obvious of our destructive forces. We may never have opportunity to use them because it's possible that we will first destroy life on earth with our own toxic garbage. Remember once we objectify other life forms then we justify our destructive path.

People used to value the Golden rule: "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you." But these days people and governments act according to a modification of that rule: "Do unto others before they have a chance to do unto you." Our survival activities have become preemptive – perhaps even cancerous.

If fear is the motivation for this second version, then love must be the motivation for the first. Consider this expanded version of the statement "God is love."

God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them. Love has been perfected among us in this: that we may have boldness on the day of judgment, because as he is, so are we in this world. There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear; for fear has to do with punishment, and whoever fears has not reached perfection in love. We love because he first loved us.

When the seed of love grows in our individual and collective hearts, in our relationships, and in our communities, we will discover that all of life matters to us in ways that we could never imagine before. We will discover that it is not so difficult to pray for our enemies (They are us anyway). We will discover that it will be much more difficult to objectify other people or other aspects of creation to justify our exploitation of their treasures.

The choice is this: be ruled by fear-based extreme competition, or allow love to balance healthy competition and cooperation.

Which will you choose?