

“Do We Really Want Love?”

1 Corinthians 13      Luke 4: 21 – 30

Rev. Wayne E. Gustafson, D.Min.

January 31, 2010

Some have said that preachers have just a handful of sermons that they preach over and over again in different forms. It's probably true. One among my particular handful of favorites involves how central love is to our Christian life. Last May I preached one of those sermons about Jesus command to his disciples and to us to love one another and in November the topic had to do with how essential love is for our survival, even as the human race. In those sermons I began to explore the meanings of love, identifying it as the most wonderful and necessary of human experiences. After all, describe God as the essence of love and we consider the power of that love to be the foundation of creation.

Today I want to look at another side of love. You have heard me say before in a variety of contexts that everything real always has another side, or a backside. Nothing comes without some cost or consequence. This is even true of love. Perhaps it would be helpful to review some of what we have already learned about love, and then extend our understanding.

I have told you some of this before. We can easily get the idea that love might mean attraction, good feeling, need, deep connection, fun, warmth, enjoyment, interest, etc. In English we certainly do try to pack a lot of different meanings into one little word. Let me remind you that the ancient Greeks had at least four words to capture the range of these sentiments: Eros for physical attraction, agape for selfless love, philia for brotherly/sisterly love, and storgé for parental respect. As you can see, while these words may be related, they address somewhat different experiences. Also, they don't all imply the same motivation for love. Physical attraction is something that just happens to us, often without our willing it or choosing it. Brotherly/sisterly love and parental respect are social expectations that are particular to the dynamics of being in a

family. Selfless love is offered by choice and is more about the quality of interaction between people than about some physical emotion or role.

While these perspectives may give us a clearer intellectual understanding of love, I am most interested today in exploring its direct impact on us. We generally believe that when we receive love, it is a good thing. It feels good to us and we generally want more of it. However, something else happens when we receive love. We tend to be changed by it. (Of course you have noticed that the theme of spiritual transformation is another of my favorite sermon topics.) But, you might ask, “Isn’t that change a good thing?” In part it is. The power of love can make some dramatic and wonderful changes in us. It can humanize us, make us more compassionate, soften our prickly defenses, and it can heal our inner wounding. At the same time, it can also make us more vulnerable and more prone to be affected by the sufferings of the world. Because it hurts, we don’t necessarily see such vulnerability as being so good. There is a sense in which love from God, presumably given to us for our good, can change us into something or someone we hardly know. I remember a therapy client one time who said, “I don’t think I can do this counseling thing anymore. What if I change into someone I don’t even recognize?” I think he was afraid of what he would have to give up in order to be healthier. The power of love, even in a therapeutic relationship designed to be for his good, was just too threatening.

And there are other challenges associated with the experience of love. Have you ever heard someone say, “I love you so much. Don’t ever change”? In one way such a statement can be comforting to hear, meaning that we don’t have to conform to some arbitrary standard in order to be acceptable. On the other hand, it can also mean that we are not allowed to change. So-called “loving people” will even get angry at us if we grow or transform in any way that causes the slightest discomfort to them. Of course, this is not really love, but we may not have learned to tell the difference.

I wonder if something like that happened to Jesus. He returned to his hometown where, as we might expect, people “loved” him. They “were amazed at the gracious words that came from his mouth.” And they referred to him as Joseph’s son. I think they loved him as the boy who grew up in Nazareth, but they were not open to experiencing the impact of what he was saying to them. It’s like the minister standing at the door shaking hands after preaching a challenging sermon only to hear “That was a nice sermon, pastor.” Were they listening? Did any of the words get into their consciousness? Or were they so enamored by their own superficial ideas about this person that they effectively ignored what was being said.

It appears that Jesus might have experienced such a reaction from the Nazarene congregation. Deciding it was important to be heard by his congregation, he restated his case in more pointed terms. And then, we read, “When they heard this, all in the synagogue were filled with rage. They got up, drove him out of the town, and led him to the brow of the hill on which their town was built, so that they might hurl him off the cliff.” So much for love! This is why pastors tremble when they hear the words “Nice sermon, pastor.” What might happen if people actually decided to listen?

Often, the scriptures make points by exaggeration, and so do preachers, perhaps even this preacher. But I simply want to warn you that spiritual growth, any kind of growth for that matter, is dangerous. It may challenge you in ways you did not expect nor even ask for.

Parents are well known for loving in ways that are not appreciated by their children. Parents have the job of teaching their children how to take care of themselves. In other words, if they are to thrive in life, children must learn the difference between self-indulgence and self-love. Therefore, parents say “no” to some things, and insist on others. Not to do that is a form of neglect. That is not to say that parents simply have the power to tell their children what to do and what not to do. Parenting

must be done with the well being of the child always in the forefront. That gives us a good definition of love.

Remember, we refer to God as our parent (OK, most of us have been taught to see to God as our Father). But either way, God's love is often challenging to us. We do not always want to avoid the things that may be bad for us, and we do not always want to face that which will ultimately be good for us. If God functions as a good and loving parent, however, then it follows that God will continue to provide us with the opportunities and experiences we need. And we may find ourselves saying, "Thanks a bunch, God."

It is important for us to remember that God's love does not contain negative judgments towards us that determine our acceptability or our value. God's judgments are fundamentally encouraging. I believe that the essence of divine presence encourages our growth, not according to some arbitrary blueprint, but in order that we grow into the persons we really are on the inside. There are many people who will tell us who they think we should be, but there are only a few who will support our growth along our own unique developmental path. It appears that the many will "love" us only as long as we remain predictable and known by them.

We find a profound description of love in Paul's first letter to the Corinthians. These well known words are appropriate so we can recognize the power and challenge of love. "Love is patient and kind; love is not jealous or boastful; it is not arrogant or rude. Love does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice at wrong, but rejoices in the right. Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things."

Given this description of real love, I, for one, prefer to live a life based in an honest appraisal of who I am. And I find that only when life is based in divine love is that really possible. Yes, that means growth and change sometimes comes in unexpected ways. It means that sometimes

vulnerability to other people and to the truly profound qualities of human experience is painful. But the alternative means to live a lie.

This is one of the challenges associated with being a member of a church like the United Church of Christ. We pray for honest growth and unvarnished love. We open ourselves to the possibilities of transformation when we are loved and when we love.

So, do we really want love, even knowing how steep the cost might be? Only you can answer that question in your heart. And the answer can only be practiced in honest relationship. The choice is yours.