

Reflection February 8, 2009

In this week's edition of the Rumors on-line magazine, Ralph Milton wrote this reflection:

It seems like only a year or so ago when I occasionally got to take Zoë to her Kindergarten class. (It was actually almost a decade ago!) I opened the door for her and she trotted off to play with her friends. She didn't look back. Zoë hadn't the slightest doubt that I or someone else in the family, would be there to pick her up and bring her home. There was none of the fear that child psychologists call "separation anxiety." Most children go through a bit of that at some point, and Zoë did too. But mostly she and her brother Jake took their parents and grandparents for granted. Which is exactly the way it should be. And so often isn't.

Zoë and Jake are at Sunday School every week, but they will learn more about God by the way their parents and grandparents behave, than they ever will in church. That's why the "parent" and "grandparent" metaphors for God are so powerful. And so dangerous.

There is nothing as important as that confidence that the loving parents will be there. Always. You can count on them. You can take them for granted. You can even ignore them. It's on that experience that their concept of God will grow.

I know that's a heavy trip to lay on parents, but it's true. A child's concept of God begins with what that child experiences in love and dependability from their primary caregiver. Scary, isn't it?

And yes, there are many, sometimes heroic tales of people who have overcome that parental deficit and found themselves in the presence of a loving, caring, accepting God.

I like to read stuff by folks we call mystics. Julian of Norwich (surprise!) is my favorite. She talks about keeping God constantly in your mind and heart.

I don't think she means that God wants to be constantly jabbered at, much less flattered constantly. I think God is quite content when the kids (us) are playing contentedly.

Yes, there need to be those tender together times. Children need laps to sit on and adults to snuggle up to. And they certainly need someone to hold them and love them when they have fallen or are ill. Or in trouble. But there's also lots of times to take God for granted. To ignore God.

Not that God is absent. But God is the air we breathe and the food we eat and the life we live. As a fish is not conscious of the water in which it swims, we are mostly unconscious of the holy love that surrounds us.

And I think that's just the way God wants it to be.

(Ralph Milton, <http://ralphmiltonsrumors.blogspot.com/>)

Today I wanted to think a little bit about where we learn to love. Where do we learn about God's love? How can we learn of God's love if the family we are raised in does not reflect that love?

A story from the news last week:

A woman in Bridgewater, N.S., was convicted of strangling her twelve year old daughter to death. Her reason? The mother claimed it was because her boyfriend had said she had to

choose between him and her daughter. I don't know if the woman claimed to have loved her daughter, but her actions seem to indicate some sort of twisted up perversion of love in her relationship with the boyfriend. What did that young girl who died learn of love from her mother? And what on earth had happened to that mother to make her think that love required, not self - sacrifice, but the sacrifice of another?

Another story: a story about forgiveness, which is central to the love we are learning. The story is of John and Eloise Bergen, two Canadian missionaries who resumed their testimony in a Kenya court room early last week.

“Last July, they were brutally assaulted in their home in the Kenyan town of Kitale. Nine men are charged with attacking 70-year-old John Bergen, beating him, slashing him with machetes, and leaving him for dead. Eloise Bergen, 66, was having a bath at the time. Five men dragged her from the bath. They beat her, breaking her jaw; she needed 35 stitches to close the machete cuts on her face. For 45 minutes, three of them raped her. But the Bergens have gone back to Kenya. To testify against their attackers. And to forgive them. "When I first met them a few short weeks after the attack," wrote Lorna Dueck in the *Globe and Mail*, "I thought it was trauma speaking. But now, seven months later, their forgiveness is still real." Dueck describes the Bergens as "Kenya's poster couple for an amazing study in applied Christianity." (From *Sharp Edges*, Jim Taylor's ezine, jimt@quixotic.ca.)

They are able to go back to Kenya because of their love of Jesus, who called on his followers to forgive 70 times seven, to love our enemies and pray for those who persecute us. Their love for the people of Kenya, their brothers and sisters in Jesus, called them back – with no guarantees that there will be no more violence. Indeed, the host who met them on their return to Kenya was attacked that very evening.

In the words of the NRSV Bible, “Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love never ends.”... The Bergens are sacrificing their safety to share the love of Jesus with the people of Kenya.

Love: the word is *agape* – the unconditional love of God, made known to us in Jesus, who asked us to love one another, as he loves us. It is something we strive for: in our families, in our churches, and in our communities. For those who have not known that love in childhood, it is very hard to grasp that love later on in life. The church is meant to be a witness to that love, especially to those who have never known it. We may not all be able to reach the level of self-sacrifice the Bergens showed, but we continue to get up each morning and put on the clothes of the Christian life: compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, forbearance, forgiveness, peace, gratitude, and love. We hope that our lives will draw others to Jesus, that they may come to know the love of God through us.

Someone commented this week that this is a community filled with the Spirit of Jesus – and the reason they know that, is the great love that they feel when they come through the doors. It warmed my heart to hear that. The testimony of love is the strongest we can offer; let us not fail in that love.

When I was away at Epiphany Explorations this weekend, I encountered two colleagues, who are about my age, and have been in ministry about the same time. They are considering leaving the ministry: one, I suspect, because he no longer loves the church, though his love for God has not lessened; the other, because the church has not been loving in its treatment of her. I could sympathise with both of them.

When I ask myself what keeps me in the church, it is, most of all, the love of Jesus I have seen and felt made known in the community that bears Jesus' name. When I think what makes it hardest to stay with the church, it is when those who claim the name of Christ behave in deeply unloving ways.

We are relentlessly human, in the church. Most of us fail in love through carelessness, or thoughtlessness, or being overwhelmed and in a hard places in our lives – that's certainly when I am most likely to falter. But there are also those in the church who deliberately seek to hurt and harm for reasons of their own. There was a time in my ministry when there were two individuals who seemed to make it their mission in life to spread the most hurtful and destructive gossip possible through the community I served. They had no reasons as far as I was ever able to tell, other than a general unhappiness with their own lives and a propensity for gossip. These were people who claimed to be Christians – and I can't tell you how many days of my ministry were spoiled by stress and anxiety caused by their gossip. Now of course, as the author of a book on ministry says, it's important not to let those "who let you down, get you down." There are far more loving, committed, supportive people in the church than there are the other kind – and even those others may, under the influence of other Christians and the movement of the Holy Spirit, find new ways of being.

Most of us in the church of Jesus Christ are just human beings who are trying to do their best to love as Jesus did. We put on those garments of Christian love mentioned in Colossians every morning. I like this image, because it reminds me of daily life: we find an outfit that pleases us, that makes us feel good, and we wear it frequently, until maybe the clothing gets a little ragged around the edges, or develops a few holes, and needs a bit of mending. As one of our Bible study members said, those clothes we've worn for years can get really comfortable! I'd like us all to keep putting on the clothes of Christian love and all that goes with it, until it becomes really comfortable and familiar to us. So what if it gets a little ragged and develops a few holes? Jesus can mend and reweave those clothes for us. Those clothes can become like a second skin – our natural way of doing and being in the world.

It's interesting that there is more than one version of the command to love in the Gospels. Most of the Gospels focus on the traditional Hebrew teaching: to love God with one's whole being and to love one's neighbour as oneself. The Gospels according to Matthew and Luke add that we should love our enemies, and pray for those who persecute us. The Gospel according to John says that we should love one another as Jesus loved us, and that the greatest love is to give oneself for one's friends. The different versions of the commandment emphasise different aspects of Christian love: love for those outside the community of faith who are hostile to us, those with whom we live and share our communities - our neighbours, and those with whom we interact closely on a regular basis: friends, family and fellow participants in the life of Gordon United. Regardless, the command is the same. Some days, one set of relationships can be harder than another. But when it comes right down to it, all of our relationships must be governed by love: without it, everything goes astray.

I'm really grateful for the anthem Tim found for us to sing today (*Love alone unites us, words Brian Wren, music Ron Klusmeier, c.1989 Hope Publishing Company*). I know it's hard to catch all the words from out there – Tim's always reminding us to enunciate! So I'm going to read them to you, because I think they illustrate what it is we are aiming for in our Mission Statement:

*Love alone unites us, wakens and invites us. Nothing else can root and ground us.
Habits of compliance, dictates and defiance, soon dispirit and confound us.
If by law, we keep score, pride will soon divide us. Love alone shall guide us.*

*Christ alone shall lead us, love that kneels to feed us. No one else can safely rule us.
Pow'r can ruin pastors, servants turn to masters, even saintliness can fool us.
Worldly games love big names, tyrants and crowd pleasers. Christ alone shall lead us.*

*Grace alone sustains us, washes and ordains us. Nothing else can work salvation.
Wealth and growth in numbers, zeal in helping others, lacking grace, become temptation.
May our faith feel God's breath, freeing, pentecostal.
Grace alone is Gospel.*

The words take us from today's theme, into next week's: Jesus Christ, the wisdom and love of God incarnate. As we move into the next week, may love unite, guide, root and ground us.

Amen.

Resources:

Gilbert Meilaender "Love abides". *Christian Century*. FindArticles.com. 02 Feb, 2009.
http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_m1058/is_27_117/ai_66355928

Forgiving George Bush
<http://gatheringinlight.com/2008/12/31/on-disciples-forgiving-george-bush-andor-the-church/>

A Match Made in Heaven, by Dr Nancy Reeves, Abingdon Press.

Forgive and Forget, by Lewis Smedes.

A challenging feminist perspective on self-giving love: *Proverbs of Ashes: Violence, Redemptive Suffering, and the Search for What Saves Us* by Rita Nakashima Brock, Rebecca Ann Parker, Rebecca Ann Parker. Also *Journeys By Heart*.

Short on-line videos of people talking about Christian love:
<http://www.30goodminutes.org/reflections/love.htm>