

“Love”

Valley Presbyterian Church – July 21, 2019

6th Sunday after Pentecost

I John 2:7-11

Rev. John Wahl

Matthew 5:23-24

We are not disciples for our own sakes, and our own actions, but for the sake of those around us as well. The actions of your individual faith actually matter to the people sitting next to you on Sunday mornings. How is that so? What you do during the week is a reflection on your fellow congregants; who you choose to be in the world is not only a witness to yourself, but to those with whom you are in relationship, or claim to have connection.

Early in the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus offers these words of instruction to disciples: “when you are offering your gift at the altar, if you remember that your brother or sister has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled with your brother or sister, and then come and offer your gift.” (Matthew 5:23-4)

To be a member of a community means understanding that our actions not only reveal who we are, but also say something about the communities of which we are a part. When we remember that God is with *us*, not just that God is with *me*, we begin to realize we are not simply members, but shapers of a community; and furthermore, that we are shaped by the community; by it’s norms, by it’s values, by it’s expressions of compassion, forgiveness, and love.¹

As Christians, we are both shapers of, and shaped by, the community – by the spiritual family – of which we are a part. Therefore, loving relationships with our brothers and sisters within the family of faith matter; for if there is a rift in the relationship – when it is strained or broken – then restorative action is required. Being reconciled is what Jesus calls this, or – in the language of recovery programs – making amends. Step 8 says: *Made a list of all persons we had harmed, and became willing to make amends to them all.*

We have been looking during this summer’s sermons at the spiritual foundations which stand behind the 12 Steps in addiction recovery programs. In doing so, we have been looking both at the inner, contemplative work that is

¹ Karoline Lewis from *WorkingPreacher.com*

required, as well as the outward, active steps that will lead to real recovery. The first 3 steps are about admitting there is a problem and that we are in need of help from beyond ourselves to discover attitudes of honesty and willingness necessary to move to steps 4 and 5, which are about making a fearless and searching inventory of all that needs to change. Contemplation is followed by action. This pattern repeats itself as steps 6 and 7 explore a willingness to surrender those character defects that have not been working. Only after these steps does the addict then move to steps 8 and 9 – making a list of people we have harmed, then making amends whenever possible and appropriate.²

The spiritual principle that is associated with the process of acknowledging those brothers and sisters that we have harmed, those with whom we must become willing to make amends, is love. As Jesus describes love in the Sermon on the Mount, it is not contemplative, but active. It requires us to pay attention to our relationships with our neighbors, and to take concrete steps to repair and restore them when necessary; before we can be at peace with ourselves and in proper relationship with God. Thus, reconciling love is a foundation for our salvation.

From our first reading, we heard that “whoever says, ‘I am in the light,’ while hating a brother or sister, is still in the darkness.” (I John 2:9) Often, we do not think about hating others; instead we carry around resentments – which is the recycling of past angers or disappointments. Resentment literally means that we continue to re-send to ourselves the same messages again and again; not able to forget or move past them. To forgive does not mean that you are condoning harmful or sometimes even cruel actions, it means that you no longer wish to allow anger, resentment or guilt to rule over you. It is choosing to move out of the past and into the present.³

The purpose of making amends is not about making the other person happy; it is about relieving the burden of guilt which may be holding you back. Jesus implies that reconciliation is more important than – or, at least, that it should take precedent over – the giving of our gifts at the altar. If we do not do the proper work on our relationships within the community, Jesus is saying, then we are not ready to live in the light of right relationship with God.

In addition to this, it just so happens that those places where we have been wounded by others, or where we ourselves caused harm to others, is where our gifts for healing often rest. So it is that recovering addicts make some of the best addiction counselors, just as those who have been through divorce or miscarriage

² Phillip Z., *A Skeptic's Guide to the 12 Steps*

³ Terrence Gorski, *Understanding the Twelve Steps*

or cancer or job loss are best suited to help others with the same condition or situation. The goal of recovery, after all – as we’ll explore with the final step – is about not just your own health but finding your way to help others.

But why bother with all of this old stuff that might have happened long ago in the past? Can’t we just let it be water under the bridge and start over fresh? Richard Rohr argues that while God fully forgives us, we must still go back and work to repair the bonds that have been broken; that God’s “amazing grace” is not a way to avoid honest human relationships, but to redo them – but now gracefully – for the greater liberation of both sides.⁴

Each of us can think of examples where we may have tried to make amends when they were not reciprocated, but we cannot always know what unseen or delayed impact forgiving others might have – on them or us. There is wisdom behind the language of this step; the list is of all those we have harmed, not those who have harmed us. If we are to seek reconciliation and make amends, then we need to get beyond our own wounds and selfish tendencies to realize that we have done some harm for which nobody else is responsible. Our tendency to blame others and shun responsibility is why it can sometimes take so long to become willing to forgive and then to make amends.

There is an old Chinese story about a boatman rowing up a river in the fog. Suddenly, he sees through the mist another boat moving downstream toward him. Frantically, he shouts at the other boatman to avoid the impending collision. As it continues to move toward him, he grows angrier and angrier at the apparent indifference of the other boatman, calling him a fool and an idiot. His fury reaches its peak as the boats collide; then, turning so they are side by side, he sees that the other boat is empty; it had come loose from its moorings and drifted downstream. When he discovers there is no one to blame, his anger finally dissipates.⁵

Sometimes, if we are truly going to love and forgive our brothers and sisters, we must acknowledge when we haven’t done enough to avoid the collisions; and may well be responsible for the damage that is done. The Big Book likens the alcoholic to a tornado that roars through the lives of others around them; and that mere sobriety – getting help to stop drinking – is not enough; that it is like the farmer who comes out of the cyclone cellar to find his home ruined; and says to his wife, “Don’t see anything the matter here, ain’t it grand the wind stopped blowin’?”⁶

⁴ Richard Rohr, *Breathing Under Water*

⁵ Philip Z., *A Skeptic’s Guide to the 12 Steps*

⁶ Alcoholics Anonymous, *Big Book*, 4th edition, p. 82

Jesus wants his disciples to be people of integrity. This means that if they are to live as a community, then they must be accountable to other members of the family of faith, and to their neighbors as well. These days, we often believe that we can remain anonymous and therefore it won't be necessary for us to be part of any group accountability. We believe that we can share our gifts when and where we want to, but that when we do it's with no strings attached. Jesus instead teaches us that in order to love our neighbor as ourselves, we have to give of ourselves fully. If there is a rift in relationship, we are to practice reconciliation; if there are wrongs that we are responsible for, then we need to make amends.

Step 8 reminds us that love is not just a feeling, but an action. As an individual, and as a congregation, and as a denomination, and as a community, and as a nation, the ways that we choose to act out our love has an affect on others around us. Hating others, whether it is out of ignorance, or from imagined or real wrongs committed, is tantamount to being in the darkness. God instead wants us to live in the light, and therefore we are called to act in love. To do so may require us to forgive; but in forgiving, we can be freed of the burdens of anger, resentment, and guilt that can only weigh us down and keep us stuck in the past.

Part of the beauty of the 12 Steps is in the simplicity of its core precepts: *one day at a time* is something you'll hear at recovery group meetings time and time again. If we are not willing today to forgive and make amends, then pray that tomorrow you will be willing. If you are not able to fully give of your gifts today, then pray that you can do what you need to do today so that you can bring it to the altar tomorrow. And if you are not living in the full light of God's love, then pray that the light would come into the darkness and in so doing, you might be able to love in the way that God loves, because God first loved us. AMEN.