

Love in a Broken World

Wayne Waibel – 05/15/2022

You'd think that with all my thoughts on living a life of love, and how fervently I pursue the notion of love that today's sermon would be a slam-dunk for me. Once again – the good Lord always comes through to remind me that I most certainly do NOT have all the answers. I got to struggle as mightily with this sermon as I do with all the others.

Maybe struggle is too strong a word, and not entirely appropriate. As I've mentioned previously, crafting a sermon is at once invigorating and quite liberating. Perhaps the jumping off point on this particular offering stands alone because the subject is critical. Especially in light of what we routinely endure these days as we search for the love in this broken world.

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When the Jewish leaders in Jerusalem challenge Peter over his mingling with the Gentiles, and actually sharing a meal with them, his response was not to engage them from an adversarial position. Interestingly – his defense came in the form of a very matter of fact step by step description of the events exactly as they played out.

This was a stroke of genius on Peter's part, though more accurately, probably the work of the Holy Spirit.

In relaying his explanation as he did, he completely removed any intention on his part. The long and the short of it was simply that he didn't feel it was his place to question any of it. For him it was the work of Almighty God in action, and he was not about to interfere.

The way his story unfolded – the Jerusalem conservatives were bound to respond with stunned silence, followed immediately by glorifying God and drawing the inevitable conclusion that “I guess the Gentiles qualify for eternal life as well then.” And this is a pivotal point in the early church.

Peter, as a disciple of Christ, and devout Jew, was able to perfectly illustrate the vision Christ had for all mankind to be resolved to God the Father. Had it been anyone else, Saul – soon to be named Paul for example – the message would not have been received the same way. In all likelihood, Christianity would have become a sect within Judaism.

What this poignantly drives home is the fact that stories, not arguments, change lives. The Spirit takes up where stories end. The Jerusalem folk were offended that Peter ate with uncircumcised men. Revulsion, either in ancient times or now, does not respond to theological arguments.

Theological reflections come afterward, either to bring what has been seen into coherence with past thinking, or to make a reasoned break with that thinking.

It's the same for us today. There are any number of things that currently resonate as unclean, or revolting by some. Same sex marriage immediately comes to mind. It wasn't that long ago that women voting was considered an abomination.

I don't know that the degree varies much between what was offensive in the first century and our current list of revulsions. The good news is that the particulars of God's sovereign grace and steadfast love are all inclusive. No exceptions.

We try to do the right thing and have a right mind, but our biases and longings and generally flawed makeup as human beings continually intercede and prevent us from our potential.

This can be especially true in a church setting. Schisms abound in the parking lot, and make their way into the hallowed halls of worship all the time.

As Christians we need to be particularly cognizant of the fact that controversy needs to be voiced, not avoided. Conflict needs to be transformed, not ignored. Enter love in a broken world.

This is also where praise comes in. God alone is both the subject and object of praise. Engaging in praise requires careful attention and intention. It is a very deliberate act.

And a genuine act of praise opens the door to the kind of love that renders prejudice and hatred wholly void of power. The old adage, “kill them with kindness,” should be echoing large in your head right now.

As Christians – we are often awkward in our testimony and less than composed in our delivery, but as we grow in love and understanding, our manner and our style continually improve. It may sometimes be messy, but that is what love is. To live in Jesus is to love and to love is to live in Jesus.

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The New Testament was not even written until two generations after Jesus’ death. It would take the next three hundred and fifty years for a bunch of combative theologians to hammer out the Nicene Creed. What Jesus wanted us to know was that although people would fight wars over who held correct beliefs, this was not His primary concern.

The creeds and doctrines would become of the utmost importance to humans over the years, while the one thing most important to Jesus would get lost as Christians wrestled with power and orthodoxy. Those heavyweights can cause tremendous fear, and fear causes us to pull apart from one another and ignore the common good.

Christ's way was not the way of learned theologians and intellectual preachers, it was the way of little children. In fact it was precisely how He put it to His beloved disciples, and in turn to us, "Little children, I give you a new commandment, that you love one another." This commandment is not about what you believe, it is about how you live.

It's worth mentioning that the final line in today's gospel lesson is Jesus reminding His disciples that, "By this all will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another." He said, "If you have love for one another." He did not say, "If you have a firm grasp of the creeds."

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Inevitably it comes down to whether or not you are going to practice your faith through action as opposed to in theory. I know that sounds simplistic and entirely obvious, but look at the world we live in. Our youth are driven almost exclusively by the media; social and otherwise. What passes for legitimate news is both unconfirmed and often laughable.

Most if not all consumables are geared toward the least common denominator perpetuating the dumbing down of an entire generation and eventually an entire nation. And this is why I take heart when I read in Revelation the simple phrase, "Behold, I make all things new."

Overcoming fear, then, becomes our charge in living a life of love through Jesus Christ. It's no accident that the two go hand in hand, as it takes great courage to live a life of love.

Whatever love might mean in a given moment; it asks for everything. Absolutely everything. Love does not calculate the costs. Much as courage gives no thought to consequence. Amen.