

Love - at the Heart of it All
CCUM - 26 April 2015

Acts 4: 5-11

5 The next day the leaders, elders, and legal experts gathered in Jerusalem, 6 along with Annas the high priest, Caiaphas, John, Alexander, and others from the high priest's family. 7 They had Peter and John brought before them and asked, "By what power or in what name did you do this?"

8 Then Peter, inspired by the Holy Spirit, answered, "Leaders of the people and elders, 9 are we being examined today because something good was done for a sick person, a good deed that healed him? 10 If so, then you and all the people of Israel need to know that this man stands healthy before you because of the name of Jesus Christ the Nazarene—whom you crucified but whom God raised from the dead. 11 This Jesus is the stone you builders rejected; he has become the cornerstone!"

1 John 3: 16-20

16 This is how we know love: Jesus laid down his life for us, and we ought to lay down our lives for our brothers and sisters. 17 But if a person has material possessions and sees a brother or sister in need and that person doesn't care—how can the love of God remain in him?

18 Children, let's not love with words or speech but with action and truth. 19 This is how we will know that we belong to the truth and reassure our hearts in God's presence. 20 Even if our hearts condemn us, God is greater than our hearts and knows all things.

Jesus' message can be synthesized into one word... LOVE. Have you heard it said that most preachers only really have a few sermons. Whether we're talking about serving others, peace, healing, showing kindness, seeking enlightenment, connecting with God through others... they really all come down to LOVE.

I was going through a rough patch several years back. I wasn't sure what I was doing. I wondered about my relationships. And whether I needed to make a big change. And very thankfully, just about every where I turned I kept getting the message - It's about LOVE. Loving helped me turn the corner. My doubts quit screaming at me and a quieter resolve and peace settled in and I could more comfortably live in the present, turning my attention more firmly toward loving.

Jesus' ministry and message certainly were all about LOVE....about knowing deep within that we are ALL beloved children of God. And that we are called to do our best to embody this.

So, Peter and John and others were preaching this message and healing folks. As it always does in small communities, word got out, and they were brought before the Jewish High Priests. "By what authority do you think you have the permission to do this?" Peter was quick to claim that they were followers of the Way... the Jesus Way. That Jesus had taught them to be of service, and to live the way of love. They had learned from Jesus that they needn't go through priests to have a direct, powerful, loving connection with God... and the power that can heal our souls. His teacher, Jesus, was his authority.

We can see how the priests would be upset. But Peter wasn't going to back down. He had the courage to claim his allegiance. Jesus was his cornerstone... at the core of who he was and what he was called to do and be.

Peter was not condemning other religions or beliefs. He was living his own faith.

Some time back, quite a few of us here at Christ Church were studying the writings of Bishop John Spong and we were so taken by him, that we invited him to come here (in 2002.) It was very exciting when this room was filled with interested folks eager to hear his message.

John Spong's perspective on Jesus' message is about love - he says,

My mantra as to the way to demonstrate the gospel of Jesus is to "live fully, love wastefully and to be all that one can be." ... I experience God as "the Source of life" empowering me to "live fully." I experience God as "the Source of love" freeing me to "love wastefully," by which I mean to love without stopping to count the cost; without pausing to determine whether the recipient of that love is an appropriate recipient. I experience God as "the Ground of all Being," who gives me the courage to be all that I can be. [Since] that is what God means to me then I worship this God by "living fully,

loving wastefully and being all that I am capable of being.” My mission as a Christian is not “to convert the heathen” as we once asserted, it is rather to assist in the task of helping all people “to live fully, to love wastefully and to be all that they are capable of being.” This is a Christianity grounded in a radical understanding of humanity.

The reason I call it Christian and the reason I claim my identity as a Christian is that when I look at Jesus, I see in him a life fully lived, a love wastefully given and the courage to be himself in all circumstances.

“Being a disciple of Jesus... requires me to be empowered by him to imitate the presence of God in him by living fully, by loving wastefully, and by having the courage to be all that God created me to be... [And] one cannot be a worshiper of God without simultaneously being an agent of [this] life to another. The pathway of God opens me [to the truth that] it is in giving that we receive, it is in forgiving that we are forgiven, it is in loving that we are loved... and find the fullness of life.”

We see many examples of loving wastefully all around us. Each of you have people you can name, and we also demonstrate our love to family and friends with daily gifts of attention and support.

I had an experience that really brought home to me how loving wastefully is at the heart of our service to others. As it turned out on that day in Boston, I had more lessons to learn. I had been at a training for nearly a week. A good week, but now I was ready to go home. I had planned the timing of the return flight with the hope that I would have a chance to connect with East coast family members beforehand. What if they had not been available. They were. We met for breakfast and a long, comfortable conversation which allowed us to check in on all the latest family news. Then they generously drove me to Logan Airport and dropped me off. I was

content and proud of myself to have arranged this with plenty of extra time for a leisurely, relaxed wait before my plane's departure. Once in the terminal, I immediately realized that I had left my bag with the ticket inside at the restaurant. All of a sudden, I didn't have so much time. In a panic, I called the restaurant and was assured that they were holding my bag. I caught a taxi to retrieve my ticket, all the while worrying about whether I would be able to get back to the airport in time to catch my flight home.

Before very long at all on this sunny Saturday, we were locked into painfully slow traffic. Not only was it a beautiful July day in Boston, but everyone seemed to be on their way to Fenway Park to see the baseball game. The driver got caught up in my panic and anxiously swore when a road he expected to use to get around the congestion turned out to be closed for construction.

When I am not in "control", the panic and discomfort can be intense. In this frame of mind and in an unfamiliar city, I even began to allow myself to think that the driver might be taking me on a "wild goose chase". How quickly I moved to a place of judgment to deal with my own feelings of frustration and impotence.

Thankfully, something clicked inside me. I like to believe that God was nudging me. I began to calm down, telling myself everything would be okay. No matter what, I could take this opportunity to see what was going on around me. It really was an absolutely lovely day. I am after all on my way back to the comforts of home and familiar routines. And if I miss my plane, there will be another. Who knows? I may even get a new flight that would get me home sooner.

Well, in nothing short of a miracle, we made it through the intense traffic to the restaurant. When I picked up my bag, the young waiter said that maybe this was happening for a reason. I couldn't imagine what that might be, but I was back in the cab on my way to the airport. With a much improved attitude, giving myself to the fates, I relaxed and finally met the human being who was my driver and began to ask him some questions.

He was originally from Eritrea and now works weekends driving a cab. He told me he was going to a local university and had nearly completed work for his degree in physics. Physics! And with excitement in his voice, he told me how much he loved the science! Wow! I let him know that I was impressed with his dedication. I asked him if he was here with family and he beamed as he told me he was married and has a 1 ½ year old daughter. He leaned over and proudly pulled her picture out of the passenger side visor and showed me. Wow! School, job, and family. I asked him what he hoped to do when he was finished with his degree. He wants to go on to get a master's degree and then go back to Eritrea to help his people. He asked about my family, and was interested in my sons and their career aspirations.

I asked him his daughter's name and what it means - It means "goodwill". He was a man of goodwill who wanted to give back to his country, to be of service. And he was a miracle worker besides. We arrived back at the airport with 10 minutes to spare. I thanked him happily. This leg of my journey had taught me about patience and goodwill.

When I was checking in at the counter, I mentioned to the man that I was relieved to have made it back in time. I couldn't believe I had been so forgetful and I had very nearly missed the plane. Hearing a little about my plight, he asked if I would like a window seat. I had already been preassigned to a center seat. When he tried to put me in an available window seat, the computer wouldn't let him do it, so he called the gate. The plane had been boarded and was very near take off, but he said into the phone, "She's had a very rough morning. Can we help her out?" His comment to me was, "Oh I think you will like the seat she found." I said, "You didn't... you got me into first class?" He just smiled. I was upgraded to first class! I had never flown first class before and probably never will again! I thanked him and openly wept with relief to just be at the airport in time, then I hurried to the waiting plane and to royal treatment. I had been treated again and again that day with love and kindness.

At the same time, we need to caution ourselves and open our eyes to others who might try to dampen and darken our experience of loving. We see too much of this

on the nightly news or read it in the newspapers. Decisions that are making life more difficult for many. People are experiencing devastating discrimination. Others work hard all day and can barely make ends meet. And then they are called lazy. A few years ago, our Tuesday morning Sojourner Group read the book, A New Kind of Christianity, by Brian McLaren. In his chapter on “Who is Jesus?” he reminds us that “Jesus can be a victim of identity theft, and people can say and do things in his name that Jesus would never ever do....[This] is a sad reality of church history and of today’s religious landscape.” Too often we see and hear people speaking as Christians who are forgetting our call to serve others with kindness...forgetting that we are ALL of us brothers and sisters, loved by God.

“We all are tempted to remake Jesus into just about anything we life. We like a Jesus who (as author Anne Lamott has said) hates the people we hate and like whatever we like...[But instead,] Jesus matters precisely because he provides us a living alternative....[We are invited] to pledge allegiance to the one who [demonstrates his authority by] his own example of service and suffering rather than by making examples of others....[This] is the power of love.”

On my trip home from Boston that day, I met people along the way who loved wastefully, doing the next right thing, showing kindness, and being all they could be. My New England family had made time for my visit in Boston. The cab driver was definitely supportive and kind. The young man at the restaurant who held onto my bag and kept it safe showed he care. The sensitive caring man at the airport ticket counter who treated me with extra kindness.... I was blessed. And when I stepped out of my fears, I was opened to allow these people to be a blessing for me.

In our scripture this morning, we are asked to remember -

let’s not love with words or speech but with action and truth. This is how we will know that we **belong** to the truth and reassure our hearts in God’s presence.

Love really is at the heart of it all. Love is our cornerstone, reflected in the ministry and message of Jesus. We are called to Love.