

Easter 5C – Love one another

John 13:31-35

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The rector of the church I was attending when I went off to seminary was fond in his homilies of contrasting “love” and “luv” – the one admirable, to be envied when we see it in other people, to be cherished when we feel it ourselves, the other just a touch, how should I put it, salacious, certainly driven more by self-interest than by altruism. Actually, in Biblical Greek there are three different words for love, because they describe three different sorts of love. There is the love you feel towards the object of your affections, *eros*, from which we derive the concept of erotic love, *philia*, the base of the name Philadelphia, the city of brotherly love, and the one so associated with the Christian religion, *agape*, the word Paul uses in the remarkable chapter 13 of his first letter to the Corinthians, where he speaks of the three great attributes, faith, hope and love. Although they have different emphases, Frederick Buechner has this to say about what he perceives as false distinctions among the seemingly different three concepts:

The first stage is to believe that there is only one kind of love. The middle stage is to believe that there are many kinds of love and that the Greeks had a different word for each of them. The last stage is to believe that there is only one kind of love.

The unabashed *eros* of lovers, the sympathetic *philia* of friends, *agape* giving itself away freely no less for the murderer than for his victim (the King James version translates it as *charity*) – these are all varied manifestations of a single reality. To lose yourself in another’s arms, or in another’s company, or in suffering for all men who suffer, including the ones who inflict suffering upon you – to lose yourself in such ways is to find yourself. Is what it’s all about. Is what love is.

And yet, I have thought much about that initial distinction I started with – between “love” and “luv,” primarily, probably, because of my experience in the courts in California, where daily I saw parents whose focus was far more on themselves than on their children, and, before them, criminals for whom their victims were not people to love and care for but objects to use in their efforts to fill their own needs and desires. What any of them displayed could hardly be thought of as love in the sense that any of the three words in Greek tried to describe. Indeed, I think it would be difficult, if we were to be especially rigorous about it, to describe these folks as really even loving themselves, so self-destructive they were in their abuse, for example, of drugs, and so lacking in self-confidence and, perhaps even more, so lacking in self-respect. But at its core what their behavior almost always appeared to be was a desperate attempt to fill a deep hollow area within themselves. If one of the primary attributes of love, as used by Jesus, was its selflessness, its movement from

us to others, the people I saw in court surely had a lot more “luv” than “love” in their lives. Although it was very tempting to look at their behavior as a deep contrast to my own much more altruistic motives, I’m afraid that with long enough exposure to the visitors we had to the courts I practiced in, the more I had to come to the realization that my own behaviors were not nearly as admirable as I should like to have believed them to be.

And that all got me to thinking. The concept of original sin has been deeply ingrained in our religion’s DNA since it was fully developed by St. Augustine. Perhaps it’s especially an aspect of the Puritan heritage of New England, which, after all, produced the New England Primer, the source of the phrase, “In Adam’s fall, we sinned all.” Nevertheless, though a son of New England, I’ve always had problems with that concept, not least because it has given such a bad name to sexuality over the centuries, which early advocates saw as the means of inheritance. Actually, that makes sense, doesn’t it? How else do we inherit any trait from our parents? In fact, if we think of Jesus as the one person who didn’t get it, as suggested by our creeds, doesn’t it lead to even more focus on sexual reproduction as the means by which original sin is passed along? For Mary was, we are told, a virgin – both before and after the Savior’s birth. It all became really difficult for this child of 20th-century skepticism.

Eventually, however, I began to see the concept of original sin, not as literal – as though it were able to be identified as one of the genes that make up our genome – but instead as a kind of metaphor describing the process in which, inevitably, we must, in the words of our old prayer book, acknowledge that “we have left undone those things which we ought to have done; and we have done those things which we ought not to have done,” because that’s just, frankly, our nature. But the question of why it is that we don’t do what we ought, instead doing what we ought not, brings us back, I believe, to where we started – with Jesus telling us to love one another the way he has loved us.

The metaphor that encapsulates the concept of original sin starts in the Garden of Eden with what are, we are told, the first humans. Instead of thinking of them as depicted in the story told in Genesis, let’s think of them as merely representative of what it means to be human – at any time, and in any environment. What are the attributes that might lead us to sinful behavior? Well, first of all, what distinguishes each of us from the rest of the world? Isn’t it really inevitably a kind of selfishness? It is that our center of consciousness is inside us, and that we interact with everyone and everything else in the world from within it. We are separated from everything and everybody else in the world by our skin. We see the rest of the world through our own eyes, since we literally cannot see through the eyes of another. And it is only through our own mouths that we may take nourishment to keep us alive. In a profound sense, then, there is the world, and there is us. Indeed, think of what it means to be an infant, perhaps the perfect exemplar of what it was like at the infancy of mankind. Not only is there the world **and** us; the world exists **for** us.

In today's gospel reading, though, Jesus calls on us to reach beyond those primitive instincts. They certainly serve an infant; they even serve humans in a harsh environment. Imagine, for example, one of our earliest ancestors thinking he might merge with whatever wild animals he might encounter in his travels. I'll wager that their idea of merger would have been substantially less benign than his. There really is a place for, if not selfishness, at least enlightened self-interest. But if there is a value to marriage, except for the procreation of the species, it is because it can serve as an incubator for the development of broader, less selfish, more altruistic instincts. Of course, parenthood, too, can broaden those instincts even further if we but let it. We *can* learn to see the world through the eyes of another. And, once we do truly accept, at our core, not merely as an intellectual proposition, that others are just as valuable as ourselves, we can begin to love them in the way that Jesus loved his disciples – whom he called his friends. When we look at his life, and listen attentively to his teachings, we can see that, as he consorted with all manner of unsavory types, including even enemies of his people, and as he insisted that even a hated Samaritan can be truly a friend, he, at least, doesn't think it is asking too much of us to love one another as he has loved.

One of the most powerful stories to emerge from the Nazi death camps is that of Maximilian Kolbe, declared by the Catholic Church in 1982 to be a saint. Kolbe was a Franciscan priest who started out as very conservative, combating Masons, Zionists, Communists, Capitalists and Imperialists. On the other hand, he also reported by ham radio on Nazi activities and helped many people escape from persecution, including something like 2000 Jews. For these endeavors he was arrested and shipped to Auschwitz. While he was there, a prisoner escaped (much later it was found that the missing man had actually been killed); the Nazi commandant ordered the death – by starvation – of 10 others to compensate. One of those selected to die was a man who cried out that his family would suffer without him. Kolbe, who was, of course, single, volunteered to take the man's place. While awaiting death, Kolbe daily led the others in prayer and hymn singing. The last of the ten to die, he was, at last, dispatched by an injection of carbolic acid.

We may not have any aspirations to the sainthood that Kolbe's sacrifice received, let alone that of Christ himself, but we need not restrict our love to ourselves either. If we truly want to be Christ's disciples, no matter how hard it may be, and I'll grant you that sometimes it's hard indeed, we must at least try to love others as he loved them – and as he continues to love *us*.

AMEN

