

Love is a Verb

I John 3:16-24

May 3, 2008

The Epistles of John – John one, two and three – it's believed are letters the author of the Gospel of John wrote to a new generation of Christians. There is in them a summary of two great themes of the Gospel of John: 1) we should believe in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ; and 2) we should love one another as he has loved us.¹ The passage read this morning invites us to explore the place of love in our lives.

It's a fairly universal human experience – love. We all are familiar with the need for it – the desire for it – the experience of it. And yet, we ask in a variety of ways: How do we know it? What does it look like?

The answers can be so complex even a learned psychologist can be challenged or so simple that even a young child can explain it. The author of this first epistle according to John offers his answer: “We know love by this, that he laid down his life for us.” “The proof is not merely that he has told us he loves us, or that he has provided certain blessings; or that he has made particular promises. No, the ultimate proof of his love is in his choice to lay down his life for us.”² Jesus had a choice – his was a voluntary act – a purposeful decision - so that we might all understand that love is a verb.

Life invites us – begs us – to prove our love in the same way. As parents we may try to share our love for our children with trinkets – you know, gifts – and our children are excited at first when they receive them. But, then their attention turns quickly to them wanting us to play with them – spend time with them. It's when our love becomes a verb that they believe our love to be real. It's our taking time to see them play ball or play checkers with them on the family room floor or when we put down the paper or turn off the TV or the computer long enough to have a conversation with them. It's when they know we are willing to lay down our lives – alter our lives – for an hour or two that they come to know of our real love.³

Former president of United Theological Seminary in Dayton, Leonard Sweet, talks about a woman that become one of his closest friends. Marie Aull was a gardener /philanthropist /environmentalist who taught him the right way to accomplish things in the garden and around the home.

One of the things he remembers is the way she prepared grapefruit for their time together after early morning prayers. She would peel the grapefruit, section it and then “each section would undergo the delicate process of having its thin membrane surgically removed leaving only the crescent of sweet-tart pink fruit to artfully arrange on the breakfast plate.”⁴

I remember my own mother slicing a grapefruit in half and then painstakingly cutting the membrane from each section. It was so much easier to eat. To this day, I have a hard time eating a grapefruit without doing the same.

Sweet went on to talk about the way both his and his wife's family did it and then observed: “From both sides of our family tree, therefore, Elizabeth and I find ourselves compelled to undertake these time-consuming, finger-slicing, tedious tasks in order to really enjoy eating a grapefruit. We just can't bring ourselves to use those pointy little spoons and stab away at it. Or even worse peel a grapefruit and eat it like an orange, spitting out the tough membrane as we go.

“You can imagine how a special family breakfast that starts with these surgically altered grapefruit is a big deal at the Sweet house. Most importantly, we’re both now busily thrusting these family traditions onto our own children so that, some day, they too can slit their fingers and mutter sweet nothings under their breath for making the art of grapefruit carving a sacred family tradition.

“Our consolation is this: as one day our kids suck their stinging fingers, our children will also be remembering their mother and father, their grandparents and great-grandparents, the special family moments and meals that started with the ritual of grapefruit preparation. We hope also they will recognize it was as much love as lunacy that kept us working together in the kitchen, slicing and sectioning, laughing and yawning, working together and loving the feeling of sacrificial love while at our work.”⁵

Author Jerry E. White notes that we learn best as children that which is transmitted to us rather than that which is taught us.⁶ Transmission is what is learned by observing actions rather than listening to words. My mom transmitted to me that it is a worthy use of time to be with people in need when she took me with her when she visited the elderly members of my home congregation who were in the nursing home around the corner from us. My dad transmitted to me the importance of sharing what you could when he let it be known that any fundraiser being done in the community for others that needed eggs simply needed to call and the eggs would be there. Generosity of resources, emotions, and time were modeled by my parents time after time. My mom has trouble to this day with the fact that she can’t do for others and has to let others do for her.

What the author of the epistles of John wanted to transmit to those fledgling house churches he was parenting was that it’s important how we treat one another – it’s important that our guiding principles be based on what is the loving thing to do – a sacrificial love.⁷

Author Craig Kelly “depicts a harried politician on his way to a press conference” – more interested in looking good than in doing good – who has a change of heart.⁸ The story starts out by having Congressman Whitney putting it to Congresswoman Jeffries about a certain position he wanted her to take consistent with his. He was riding in the backseat of his Ford Explorer along with his chief of staff, Warren.

After Congressman Whitney snapped his phone shut on Congresswoman Jeffries, his chief of staff, Warren, caught him up on his next day’s itinerary: a breakfast meeting with Senator Davis, the Appropriations Committee meeting, a vote on the tariff bill, a security briefing on the upcoming trip to Pakistan, etc.

The congressman then inquired about where they were now going and Warren reminded him that it was a shelter for battered women called Amy’s House. He reminded him that he was going to take part in a press conference about government funding of faith-based initiatives in low-income neighborhoods.

After a brief exchange between the two of them about the congressman’s desire to be home in time to watch the baseball game and the realization that it was not going to happen, they arrived at the house. It was surrounded on all sides by dilapidated or empty houses. As they drove down the street they saw a little girl pushing a dirty plastic toy stroller down the sidewalk followed by a barefoot baby wearing nothing but a diaper. Congressman Giles met them. He informed Congressman Whitney that the press conference wasn’t ready to begin and suggested they wander around the facility a bit so that they might better be able to plug the place.

Giles guided Whitney through the front door. They noticed a group of five young women in an adjoining room. Each of them was holding a Bible and obviously deep in discussion. They then were approached by the director

of the center, Amy Carter. When asked about numbers being housed, Ms. Carter reported that there were seven women with children – 20 total in the house. Whitney noticed that on each table was a different game – Hungry, Hungry Hippo, Operation, Trouble, checkers.

Trying to make conversation Whitney asked Amy how she thought she would use the extra funding. Her reply took him back a bit. “Look, Congressman, I’m very grateful for the money. I know it will do a lot of good here, but as broke as we are, money is not the most pressing need we have.”

A surprised Whitney asked her, “No? Then what is it you need?”

Ms. Carter chuckled a little and then said, “Me, personally, I don’t need anything. My God and this ministry give me what I need. But what these women and kids need is for someone to not just throw money around and think that will make everything better. They need to be loved. I’m showing them everything I can about God’s love for them, and that’s a lot, don’t get me wrong, but they need to see other people out there giving a “*%” well, you know – about them.”

She blushed a little and looked down. “I’m sorry, Congressman. I’m a saved, Spirit-filled woman, but when I think about all those people out there, in their fancy homes and jobs, in that beautiful Capitol building, telling people how we need to be supported, or even tossing a few bucks our way and thinking they’ve done their good deed for the year, it starts to bring back a few old habits.”

Whitney was dumbfounded. He wasn’t used to people being so frank. He sensed that he was part of the problem she had just described. Sensing her audience might be receptive to a bit more, she pointed to a little boy named Marcus and said, “He and his mother came three days ago. She had an eye swollen shut, two missing teeth, and a cracked rib. Marcus had a bruise across his cheek as well as his shoulder. He wouldn’t speak to anyone for over a day. He just sat there, looking at that checkerboard, never playing it, never letting anyone come to play with him. According to him, checkers is a ‘man’s game.’ His mother told me that he used to play with his grandfather all the time until some of her boyfriend’s addict friends jumped his grandfather, stole his wallet, and stabbed him while he was walking Marcus home. It’s a miracle that they didn’t do anything to Marcus. His grandfather died later that night.

“When the mother confronted her boyfriend about it, he didn’t take it too well, and that’s why they’re here. You see, Congressman, money, fancy speeches, and good intentions won’t heal that boy’s wounds. That boy needs to know what love is again, love not in words from a distance but love in action, love up close. He needs Jesus in his hearts, but he also needs to see the love of Jesus with his eyes in the actions of another human being. So you’ll forgive me if I’m not jumping up and down in excitement to see a bunch of politicians that I’ll probably never see again hold a press conference in my front yard. Now, if you’ll excuse me, I need to get back to these kids.”

Whitney stared at Marcus until his vision was a bit blurred. He walked over to Marcus and lowered himself to one knee.

“Marcus?” The boy didn’t look at him.

“Hey, my name’s Mark. It’s nice to meet you.” Nothing.

“I, uh, I noticed you sitting here by yourself with this perfectly good checkerboard in front of you, and I thought you might want to take me on. I used to be pretty good at checkers back in the day. I would beat my old man almost every time. Wanna try your luck?”

Marcus still said nothing, still staring at the board. Whitney sighed and rose to his feet.

“Well, I just figured you could maybe like someone to talk to, to keep your checker skills sharp. But if you don’t think you’re quite ready to take me on, that’s cool.” He turned and started to walk away.

“Red.” Whitney turned to see if he heard correctly. Marcus looked up at him.

“I always play red. You can be black.”

Whitney smiled and took a seat across from Marcus. He quickly found Marcus to be a worthy opponent, losing to him within 10 minutes. He also noticed Marcus start to smile every time he said, “King me.” He even chuckled a little when he took Whitney’s last piece.

“Okay, now I’m warmed up,” Whitney said. “Best two out of three?”

“Okay, but you have to set up this time. It’s the rules.”

“Yes, sir.” Whitney began setting up the black pieces in front of him and the red in front of Marcus. “Hey, Marcus, do you think I could come by now and then and play checkers with you, you know, just to keep sharp and all?”

Marcus looked at him, sizing him up. “Okay,” he finally said, “but I’m always red.”

“You got it,” was the Congressman’s reply.

As their second game started, Congressman Giles came into the room. He walked up to Whitney and whispered, “We’re all set up. I’ve heard this press conference will be carried nationally, so we’d better get out there.”

Whitney looked up at him. “Uh, yeah, Giles, I don’t think I’ll be able to participate. I’m working on something a little more important right now. You all go on without me.”

Giles gave Whitney a quizzical look. He whispered again, “But you’re playing a game of checkers with a kid.”

Whitney smiled his own million-dollar smile and said, “I know.”⁹

Love is the foundation of the Christian church – the cement that glues together the church community. Nothing else can come before this love. Nothing else is possible without this love. It’s got a sacrificial quality to it when it’s a verb – it’s symbolized in this meal we share.

“On the night”

1. David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, Feasting on the Word (Louisville-London: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008), p. 443.
2. David Kalas, “Terms of Surrender,” www.sermonsuite.com.
3. Ibid.
4. Leonard Sweet, “Transmission,” Collected Sermons (ChristianGlobe Networks, 2007), 0-000-1415 as shared on www.esermons.com.
5. Ibid.
6. Ibid.
7. Ibid.
8. Craig Kelly, “Love in Deed,” www.sermonsuite.com.
9. Ibid.