

“Fools in Love”

Sermon by Clare Krabill

June 2, 2013

Day Away @ The Hermitage

I believe that one of the great purposes of the Church is to receive encouragement from one another and to learn from each other's experiences. There are two life lessons I would like to share with you today that I have learned through my experiences. These lessons are quite precious to me. The first is that in traversing my greatest life challenges, God's Word has been my guide. Without it I would have been lost and left to navigate difficult decisions with my emotions as my compass. The second flows from the first: pursuing the lavish, unconditional, never-ending love of my Lord, which I have found through the reading of his word and through prayer, has given me the joy and strength to love both myself and others in a way I would not have been able to do without that love.

I have not spent my life walking with God. As a child I attended church every Sunday and I very much liked the idea of God that I had at that time: a benevolent and kind creator and Father. He was there for my care and good. As an adult I continued to attend church but with somewhat less regularity and moved to attending on a weekly basis again during my first pregnancy. I wanted to know God at that point in my life and recognized that God was an important part of life but there was still something missing. In 2000 a neighbor, whom I was attending church with, came to my house. (he and I had had some conversations about faith and God and I am sure he understood that my theology was more secular than Biblical.) He sat down with me and talked to me about Jesus, about having a relationship with him and about giving myself over to a Spirit lead life. I prayed the “sinner's prayer” and will tell you that I felt an immediate change in my being. The next morning I awoke early and spent a long time reading the Bible and began my journey of discerning the Word of God. This habit of beginning my day with reading the Bible and praying continued for the next 7 years until I began working full time and could not dedicate the same amount of time to that pursuit. I felt a huge hunger for his Word and great joy in His presence. Whereas previously I would have made my decisions based upon my emotions and my own sense of morality, it became my desire to live out 1 John 2:3-6:

“We know that we have come to know him if we obey his commands. The man who says, “I know him”, but does not do what he commands is a liar, and the truth is not in him. But if anyone obeys his word, God's love is truly made complete in him. This is how we know we are in him: whoever claims to live in him must walk as Jesus did,” 1 John 2:3-6.

The idea of God's love being made complete in me and loving as God intended me to do seized me as the purpose of living. In trying to walk like Jesus I became for the first time in my life aware of the many ways I was sinning: little manipulations to get my way; thinking unkind thoughts about others; angry words of impatience to my children. These were some of my sins and I was grateful for a forgiving God who loved me and offered his grace and mercy unconditionally. But there was another much less pleasant side of this: I became more aware of the ways others were sinning as well. Once this entered my thinking I found it much more difficult to like those around me. I knew there must be a way as God expected it from his followers as John wrote in 1st John:

“This is the message you have heard from the beginning: We should love one another,” 1 John 3:11.

And...

“Dear friends, let us love one another, for love comes from God. Everyone who loves has been born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love does not know God, because God is love. This is how God showed his love among us: He sent his one and only son into the world that we might live through him. This is love, not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins. Dear friends, since God so loved us, we also ought to love one another”, 1 John 4:7-11.

Prior to giving my life to Christ, I had easily liked many people and loved very few people. After becoming a Christ follower, I found that I was having a harder time liking people. This is not the way it was supposed to be. What I was feeling for those around me was marred by my being judgmental. I was assigning value to them based upon how good and worthy I perceived them to be. I also found, in taking a long hard look at myself, that some part of the love I was feeling was a self-righteous attempt to feel good about myself. How many people could I help find Christ? How well could I step into different roles within the church? In and of themselves good things but spoiled by my motivation for it to be not only for God but also about my own validation. I came to understand that I did not love others in the way God wanted me to.

But while these were challenges and a cause for my humility my greatest challenge was how to love one who related to me with disdain and cruelty. Matthew recorded Jesus' words about this in Matthew 5:

“You have heard that it was said, ‘Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ But I tell you: Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you that you may be sons of your Father in heaven. He causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and he sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous. If you love those who love you, what reward will you get? Are not even the tax collectors doing that? And if you greet only your brothers, what are you doing more than the others? Do not even pagans do that? Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect, Matthew 5:43-48.

One thing I have observed in myself, Christians and humanity is that we tend to be much better at “loving” our enemies when they are far away both geographically and relationally. As a person/enemy moves more into our physical space and becomes more a part of our daily life, they can become harder to love. And as they draw closer to us relationally they also can become harder to love. When I worked in the south side of Chicago as a physical therapist in trauma many of my patients were young African American men who were the victims of gang violence. What I learned was that as a young Caucasian woman I was much safer in the African American gang neighborhoods than if I had been a young African American man. People were harming those who were most like them. Working now at the Center for Healing and Hope with a high Latino patient population, a common complaint we hear from our Latino patients is that when they receive medical care from Latino medical professionals in the community they feel they are treated harshly and without respect. In my life among Christians I find that many of us reserve our greatest disdain for other Christians who are just a little different than ourselves. John knew this which is why he specifically wrote about the way we should not feel toward our own Christian brothers and sisters:

“Anyone who claims to be in the light, but hates his brother is still in the darkness. Whoever loves his brother lives in the light, and there is nothing in him to make him stumble. But whoever hates his brother is in the darkness and walks around in the darkness: he does not know where he is going because the darkness has blinded him,” 1 John 2: 9-11.

And Jesus spoke to the actions which spring from the hate and disdain we can hold within our heart:

“You have heard it said to the people long ago, ‘Do not murder, and anyone who murders will be subject to judgment.’ But I tell you anyone who is angry with his brother will be subject to judgment. Again, anyone who says to his brother, ‘Raca,’ is answerable to the Sanhedrin. But anyone who says, ‘You fool!’ will be in danger of the fire of hell,” Matthew 5:21-22.

Think back on all of the harsh feelings or exchanges you might have had with a co-worker, friend or family member. They say we hurt the ones we are closest to. Have you ever stopped and wondered why Jesus spoke of metering out the greatest discipline upon those who considered others foolish rather than those who were simply angry?

In my past I found myself in a situation where the person I considered to be a fool and my enemy was also the person who was closest to me geographically and relationally-my former spouse. How could I possibly show love to someone who wasn’t very likeable, did not treat me with respect or dignity and at times even sought to harm me? And even more important how could I ever expect anything good to come of the relationship if I regarded him as a fool, if I treated him like he was not likeable, if I did not love him the way God asks us to love? I saw all of the crappy things he did, the lies he told and what I perceived to be a great lack of sound judgment and I had

written him off. I returned meanness for meanness; I worked hard to prove I was right through endless fighting. I am sure I was a source of pain for him. But then I took to heart John's words, **"Whoever does not love does not know God, because God is love,"** and knew I needed to set about living my life in a different way. The love of God is unconditional and this is the way we are called to love others, including our enemies.

I do not claim to have loved him fully in the way God intended-I don't think any of us are ever able to completely do this on a continuous basis. But over the years I did set about doing the best I could. I spent hours reading and meditating on scripture-¹ John in particular. I read books on love by contemporary and ancient Christian authors. I attended counseling and confessed to my closest friends asking them to hold me accountable and to lift the relationship up in prayer. In my relationship with my former spouse I turned the other cheek. I prayed for him and I walked the extra mile. I held him accountable for the pain he caused me and established healthy boundaries. I treated him with respect and kindness even when these were not the emotions I felt. I asked God to help me express love to my former husband. I also asked God to help me to see myself through God's eyes that I might find healing from years of living with a man that treated me with disdain. I want you to understand that this took intentional living, continual reliance on God and it was hard work.

The greatest key and the one thing I really want you to hear today is this: It is impossible to do this genuinely without God's love. As John wrote we are only able to love with the love we have received from God:

"We love because he first loved us. If anyone says, 'I love God,' yet hates his brother, he is liar. For anyone who does not love his brother, whom he has seen, cannot love God, whom he has not seen. And he has given us this command: Whoever loves God must also love his brother," ¹ John 4:19-21.

So the most important thing about loving that I found on my journey, more important than the reading and the intellectual learning about God's love, was to actively pursue receiving God's love. Throughout those challenging years I went about receiving God's love through prayer, through the reading of scripture, through accepting beauty as God's gift to me, through the love of others, and through acknowledging the wonder of creation, including my own. I attempted to receive God's love joyfully, expectantly, without limits, freely, trustfully, continuously, intentionally and thankfully. In giving thanks I acknowledged the receipt of God's gifts given to me in love every day. I found that God filled me with a love that was overflowing-joyous, huge and wondrous.

Now I have heard many people give testimony about this sort of thing and of the healing that later followed in the relationship. People tend to tell the stories that have what our society sees as happy endings. And it is what I believed would and could happen in my situation. I wanted this very much for my children, my former spouse and for myself. I desired relational tenderness, trust and kindness-who wouldn't? The reality is that this is not the way it always works out. There is no greater example of this than Jesus himself who loved perfectly. Upon entering Jerusalem prior

to Passover and his betrayal he grieves, **“Oh Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you who kill the prophets and stone those sent to you, how often I have longed to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but you were not willing,” Matthew 23:37.** Jesus who is love incarnate was hated, held in disdain, tortured, humiliated and murdered brutally by those he loved. God has created us with free will and we can choose to accept love or to return love with disdain and cruelty.

Sometimes these stories end in a very different way than we expected. Was there healing in my former marriage relationship? No. But was there healing in my own soul? Yes. In returning love for disdain, I found healing. By responding to violence with peace, I found peace within my own soul. I stopped the process of my own bitterness and self-destruction that comes from unforgiveness, vengeance and hate. I came to see myself more clearly through the perspective of God's grace and love and less through the eyes of one who related to me with anger and malice. I became free the way God intended me to be. Free to love despite what another does because of the unconditional love I always receive from God. I can freely say that I want the best for my former husband and I pray for God's healing in his life.

Julian of Norwich-penned the following words in the 14th Century and as she was far more eloquent than I, I would like to share with you her thoughts on the love of God:

“Just as our flesh is covered by clothing, blood is covered by our flesh, so are we, soul and body, covered and enclosed by the goodness of God. Yet, the clothing and the flesh will pass away, but the goodness of God will always remain closer to us than our own flesh.

God only desires that our soul cling to him with all of its strength, in particular, that it clings to his goodness. For of all the things our minds can think about God, it is thinking upon his goodness that pleases him most and brings the most profit to our soul.

For we are so precious loved by God that we cannot even comprehend it. No created being can ever know how much and how sweetly and tenderly God loves them. It is only with the help of his grace that we are able to persevere in spiritual contemplation with endless wonder at his high, surpassing, immeasurable love which our Lord in his goodness has for us.

Therefore we may ask from our Lover to have all of him that we desire. For it is our nature to long for him, and it is his nature to long for us. In this life we can never stop loving him.

I learned a great lesson of love... For of all things, contemplating and loving the Creator made my soul seem less in its own sight and filled it full with reverent fear and true meekness and with much love for my fellow Christians.”

I find I still am challenged by a judgmental nature. Loving as God intends me to love is not something that I have achieved, but it is something I continue to work towards. I know that the only cure to this is to actively and intentionally pursue receiving the love that God gives to me. I confess I do not attend to this the way I wish I did. It is my hope that as a body of believers we can

encourage one another on the path of love. Whom are you having difficulty loving? Whom do you believe to be a fool? How can you go about more fully filling yourself with a love that is greater than you can imagine and pouring it out on those around you?