

Sermon by Pastor Tim O'Brien

February 5, 2017

New Testament Lesson 1 Corinthians 13
Gospel Lesson John 8: 7-11

Larger Love

The musical team of Gilbert and Sullivan who wrote such tremendous musicals like the pirates of Penzance, the HMS Pinafore, the Mikado and others were doing very well together until they bought a theater. Then Sullivan decided it ought to be re-carpeted. So he bought the carpet, but Gilbert intercepted the bill. When he got the bill, he was very angry and hit the ceiling. He took Sullivan to court because he felt that as long as Sullivan had ordered the carpet without consulting him, he should not have to pay for it. It all wound up in a great lawsuit.

There was so much anger that they stopped speaking to each other. When Sullivan wrote the music, he sent it by messenger to Gilbert. Gilbert would pen the words and send it by messenger back to Sullivan. Then, when they would have their wonderful performances, they would each come from opposite ends of the stage to take their bows, but they would never look at each other.

Relationships. We all have them. Our marriages, families, friends, co-workers, social clubs, on and on we are all in one kind of relationships or another. And the fact is, like with Gilbert and Sullivan, relationships can be tough at times and they all take work.

You know in every relationship – there are some basic needs and desires we all have – we all need for the people around us to listen to us – to listen to us without being judgmental or critical. We also want people to care about us – to walk with us in those times of joy and pain. And we all need to have someone be on our side. A loved one who knows us better than we know ourselves. A friend who says to us, "I don't know what you're going through and I don't know how hard it is for you and I don't even begin to understand all the circumstances, but I want you to know that I'm on your side."

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But the hard truth is that we have our faults and our failures. We are human. We hurt one another way to easily. We don't always listen like we should to other people, we don't believe or take the side of others as we know we could. Our love is so imperfect. The fact is - no one person, no one relationship, no one connection is ever going to satisfy our need to be heard, understood, and accepted or lead to a lasting sense of peace all the time. What we believe, though, is that there is a relationship that puts all our other relationships into perspective – a relationship that flows from a larger love that surround us and is working on our hearts, our minds, and our spirits.

In our Gospel lesson we see this larger love at work as we meet this woman caught in an act of adultery. Because of what she had done, no one listened to her, no one believed her, and no one would certainly stand by her. And yet, Jesus did all three. He listened with his heart to her story – the story of her sins, her fault and failures - he believed her, and most of all he stood by her facing that angry crowd ready to throw their stones. That self-righteous judging crowd who were no better than she, and Jesus knew it and he said it. For being perfect is not a requirement for forgiveness and new life. For Jesus tells that crowd and that woman, we are called to be faithful, not perfect. And that he will accept us even in our failings if we only turn to him. And so Jesus said to the woman, “Neither do I condemn you. Go your way, and from now on do not sin again.”

However, when we hear this scripture or others like it – we very often hear a phrase that gets used – “Love the sinner, hate the sin” But is this the relationship we are to have with others – the love we are called to show? The problem with this statement is that Jesus never said this – what he did say was – “Love your neighbor” – And the word for love that is used literally means – “I'm going to be dogged and determined to seek the best for the other person” – he also did say to love your enemy – To love those persons who have hurt us or mistreated us – Because when we love like this - the world is changed.

So, why not say love the sinner – Aren't we supposed to love everyone? When we label another person as a sinner and not a neighbor we put the focus on their faults and failings – we begin to judge them as we elevate ourselves over

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another – In Matthew's Gospel Jesus says these words – “Do not judge lest you be judged – take the log out of your own eye before you take the splinter out of someone else's eyes.” In other words – when we focus on labeling or condemning or judging others – our vision gets cloudy - we can't possibly love them or see them or treat them as a neighbor or a child of God.

Our business is not to point out others sins – our focus needs to be on us – we have enough sin in our own lives without taking time to point it out in others – In fact, Paul tells us in Romans “Let love be genuine; hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good” In other words we need to hate our own sin – and not worry about judging others.

Now, there are times when we need to denounce sin publicly – gross injustices that happen – we need to speak up for those who can't speak up for themselves - sins that harm or oppress others – child abuse – racism – injustice – we should hate children die because they didn't have enough eat – we should have righteous indignation in the face of injustice – These are the sins we need to hate.

So, here's the point – It's the Holy Spirit's job to convict, it's God's job to judge and it's our job to love. Period.

The writer and surgeon Bernie Siegel tells the story of Joseph, an inmate of a concentration camp, who after six years of serving the enemy as an interpreter, was still full of energy and physical health and a gentle positive spirit. To the other prisoners, he was a beacon of hope, an agent of reconciliation, one who was constantly urging them to forgive each other and the enemy. This man's positive spirit was all the more amazing because of the horror which he himself had experienced at the beginning of the war - watching his own family: his wife, his two daughters, his three little boys, shot before his very eyes by Nazi soldiers in Warsaw.

When asked to explain his lack of bitterness, Joseph responded, "I had to decide right then whether to let myself hate the soldiers who had done this. It was an easy decision, really. I was a lawyer. In my practice I had seen too often what hate could do to people's minds and bodies. Hate had just killed the six people who matter most to me in the world. I decided then that I would spend the rest of my

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life - whether it was a few days or many years - loving every person I came in contact with."

We are called this day to embrace this larger love that transforms us, others, and our world – through our relationships. But does it make sense? And does it work? Or is it an offense in our dog-eat-dog world? Only if we look at it in a new way through the eyes of faith. [read matt 5 ³⁸ "You have heard that it was said, 'Eye for eye, and tooth for tooth.' ³⁹ But I tell you, do not resist an evil person. If anyone slaps you on the right cheek, turn to them the other cheek also. ⁴⁰ And if anyone wants to sue you and take your shirt, hand over your coat as well. ⁴¹ If anyone forces you to go one mile, go with them two miles. ⁴² Give to the one who asks you, and do not turn away from the one who wants to borrow from you. – many think these as doormat verses - they are far from it – give other cheek as an equal/give other coat to show injustice of taking everything/go second mile to show lengths go to serve – These verses are the key to living out a loving relationship – for they call us to stand up and realize our worth, our dignity, our value – and because we realize it and embrace it and own it – we don't respond with judgement or hate or vengeance or bitterness - we respond out of our relationship we have with this divine larger love of Christ in our lives – a love that sees the value in someone regardless of how they have acted or treated us – a love that disarms hate with mercy and judgment with forgiveness - A love that is dogged and determined to seek the best for another person – simply because they are our neighbor.]

For this is the larger love we are called to live out with our lives. And this love is not sweet or syrupy, it is not weak or passive, it is not something we can ignore or practice when it is convenient. For the love of God goes beyond just mere kindness. Because when this larger love grabs a hold of our hearts it doesn't let go, it doesn't let up, it doesn't diminish. It works on us over and over, opening us, cleaning us up, molding us, guiding us, and leading us to reach out with all we got, with all our faith, with all our gifts. For it takes a larger love to meet the challenges of our lives and our world.

For Paul tells us, "Love never gives up, love cares more for others than for self. Love doesn't want what it doesn't have, love doesn't strut, doesn't have a swelled head, doesn't force itself on others, isn't always "me first", Love doesn't

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fly off the handle, doesn't keep score of the sins of others, doesn't revel when others grovel, Love always looks for the best, never looks back, but keeps going to the end." – we often hear this at weddings but is actually a blueprint for all our relationships and a picture of what love looks like and what we strive towards –
For

Love looks like a woman caught in the act of prostitution who gets a second chance. Who meets a savior who stands beside her, stands up for her even if it means he is killed with her, and offers her a new life through him.

Love looks like the parents standing by their son or daughter who has a drug problem. Even though she has stolen from them, lied to them and been arrested numerous times, nothing can change the parent's love for this child.

Love looks like a woman, nervous and anxious to the point of throwing up, but who joins a rally to stand side by side with and stand up, in the face of criticism, for the poor, the weak, for those who others say should have no rights.

Love looks like man getting ready to tell his best friend who has been going through a lot of marital trouble his faith story of why he believes and how it made a difference in saving his marriage.

Love looks like Jesus Christ beaten, bloody, suffering on a cross, choosing to die so that you and I might have eternal life.

I urge us all to accept the gift of this larger love in our lives. This love that moves mountains and opens hearts and causes people to drop their stones. This real radical love, which enables one to forgive the unforgivable and causes people to do things that look foolish to those who do not understand, such love comes only from God, comes only through the support and nurturing of the Spirit. It's like seeing a runner coming down the track and saying to yourself, "Hey, I could run that fast!" unaware of the years of daily training required to do what she does.

To love as God calls us to love requires of us a daily commitment to be connected to the source of our faith and demands that we submit ourselves to this divine love – that calls us to risk being open and vulnerable and see this world

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through the eyes and heart of Jesus Christ. In other words, it is being in a relationship of faith that influences all our other relationships in our life.

So, let us come to deepen this relationship even more –For our God who never leaves us, always hears us, believes in us, and stands by our side every day whispers in our ear a message of hope, I love you for who you are, who you can become and by my grace who you are becoming. Go out and be my instrument. Go out and let your relationships be instruments and vessels for love and hope and peace in this world. For together we serve. Together with God's strength and grace let us work to create a fellowship and community and world of love. Amen.