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The Truth Begins with Two

As we shared earlier, in what may be the most risqué book in our sacred scriptures, the writer speaks of love in these terms: “[L]ove is strong as death, passion fierce as the grave. Its flashes are flashes of fire, a raging flame. Many waters cannot quench love, neither can floods drown it.”

Passion! How passionate are we about our faith? When we sing at the end of our services, “Blest be the tie that binds our hearts in Christian love,” do we mean it? Do we feel it? Are we passionate about it? In Revelation 3:15, the author writes, “I know your works; you are neither cold nor hot. I wish you were either cold or hot.” As I read it, the admonition here is to be passionate or dispassionate, to commit one way or the other, not be lukewarm.

One of my favorite Christian writers is John Powell, a Catholic Jesuit, and I am particularly fond of his little book *Unconditional Love*, which is subtitled *Love Without Limits*. There, in rather idealistic terms, Powell points out that in a truly loving relationship, in a truly loving community one achieves liberation. How does our beloved community stack up to Powell’s ideal?

He writes: “You can be whoever you are, express all your thoughts and feelings with absolute confidence. You do not have to be fearful that love will be taken away. You will not be punished for your openness and honesty. There is no admission price...no rental fees or installment payments to be made. There may be days when disagreements and disturbing emotions come between us,” but you have the word of our commitment. We “will not go back on our word to you. So feel free to be yourself, to tell...of your negative and positive reactions, of your warm

and cold feelings. [We]...cannot always guarantee [our]...strength, but one thing [we]...do know: [We]...will not reject you! [We are]...committed to your growth and happiness.”

We are Christians, and I believe Jesus teachings support John Powell’s. We believe Jesus of Nazareth was God in the form of a human being, a third personality in the unity of God. We believe he was the only Son of God, who by his death made it possible for human beings, through faith, to have eternal life.

To accept this view, one must be prepared to accept the notion that we are all sinners and in need of salvation. And since none of us is perfect, this idea makes a lot of sense. The position stated in the Gospel of John (3:16) that “God so loved the world that he gave his only son that whosoever believes in him will not perish but have everlasting life” – at least one translation renders this “will not be lost but have real life” – ...John 3:16 has always bewildered me somewhat. For what this famous verse suggests is that God’s love for us is conditional; believing in God is a condition that, according to the doctrine, must be fulfilled in order that salvation be achieved. Is God’s love for humankind conditional? When we celebrate the divinity of Jesus of Nazareth, are we celebrating the existence of a man whose greatest claim to fame is that he became a sacrificial lamb for believers?

From my earliest days in a Methodist Sunday School, I heard that God is love. This description of God and the idea that a loving God would sacrifice his son somehow never appeared consistent to me. As I grew older, the conditional message of John 3:16 only added to my confusion. The view of Jesus as a sacrificial lamb made little sense to me. I simply didn’t have a need for that view of the Lord of Lords.

So, when we celebrate the birth, life, death and resurrection of Jesus, what is it that

we celebrate? I want to suggest that we celebrate the life of a man and a personality of the divine, who preached a doctrine of love, not the conditional love of John 3:16, but the unconditional love described in the 13th chapter of Paul's first letter to the early Christian congregation at Corinth. There, among many other statements about love, it says, "Love is patient; love is kind and envies no one. Love is never boastful or conceited, nor rude; never selfish, not quick to take offence. Love keeps no score of wrongs; does not gloat over others' sins, but delights in the truth."

Of all the sayings attributed to Jesus of Nazareth, there are not many that scholars are willing to say with confidence Jesus actually said. However, they are reasonably sure that Jesus actually said something like, "You are to love your neighbor as yourself." And the same scholars are as close to certain as they can be that Jesus told his disciples to love their enemies probably followed by something like, "Tell me, if you love those who love you, why should you be commended for that? Even the toll collectors do as much, don't they?"

Are these ideas we Congregationalists can live with? Well, we do pay them lip service in the form of our abilities to read and interpret scripture for ourselves.

Before going further, it might be wise to ask what kind of love we are talking about here. In my Methodist days, there was at least one sermon each year on love, and inevitably the sermonizer ran through the litany of the three Greek words for love: *eros*, *philo*, and *agape*. *Eros* is the root of *erotic* – enough said. *Philo* is found in *Philadelphia*, which stands for "the city of brotherly love" and *philosophy*, "the love of wisdom." *Agape*, which my sources say was seldom used in classical Greek, represents the kind of love that God has for humans. It's *agape* that in most cases gets translated "love" in Christian scripture (or in the King James

Version of the Bible sometimes gets translated as “charity”)...it’s *agape* that we are most likely talking about here, but Pastor Seth, who is more of a Greek scholar than I encourages us not to make too much of the distinctions.

Nonetheless, I believe, Jesus and Paul, as well, are saying that we in religious community should love one another as God loves us. Are we up to the task? Maybe, but I think there is a fundamental element in our contemporary belief system, especially here in New England, that works against the practice of loving in our congregations, and that is Yankee individualism. From where I stand, we New Englanders tend to embrace the attitude of Fritz Perls’ famous Gestalt Prayer from the 1960s....And there are enough gray hairs on the collective heads here assembled to remember that prayer:

I do my thing and you do your thing.

I am not in this world to live up to your expectations,

And you are not in this world to live up to mine.

You are you, and I am I, and if by chance we find each other, it’s beautiful.

If not, it can’t be helped.

Can we live and thrive and grow as a community based on chance meetings? I believe there is a better way and that Jesus and, following him, the evangelist Paul, pointed the way. It is through the unconditional love of one another that we can intentionally build community – unconditional love that mirrors God’s love for us, unconditional love as described by John Powell.

Powell’s description of love and loving can be a model for religious fellowship, true friendship, marriage or any other relationship that provides the opportunity both to love and to grow.

After discussing how Jesus’ teachings are based on a life principle of love, Powell

asks the crucial question facing one who would claim that a life based on loving is fulfilling. He asks, “Is a life of love, which involves a permanent and unconditional commitment to the happiness of another (I would add, *or others*), ...is a life of unconditional love really the way to personal satisfaction and human fulfillment?” (p. 44)

This seems a legitimate question for us who put such emphasis on the individual’s search for truth and meaning. In fact, John Powell addresses the tension between self-fulfillment directly sought and self-fulfillment as a by-product of loving. He echoes the words of Archibald MacLeish, who wrote: “The crisis of our time/As we are beginning/Painfully to perceive/Is a crisis not of the hands/But of the heart.” The tension is one Powell describes as “Doing My Thing vs. I-Thou.” This latter designation is probably a recognition of the insights of the Jewish theologian Martin Buber who contrasted I-Thou relationships, in which people address one another, to I-It relationships in which *the I* views the other as an object. But Buber’s ideas must be the topic of another sermon on another day.

Think again with me on Fritz Pearl’s “Gestalt Prayer.” It is primarily a call to *do my thing* as is the Yankee manner, a focus on individual freedom and personal, spiritual growth, although Powell does suggest that Perls’ prayer might have been intended to “expose the clinging dependency and jealous possessiveness...[that] are, in fact, counterfeits of true love.” Even given that that was Perls’ motive, there is a subjectivism in the Gestalt Prayer that misses the human need to form truly loving relationships. This gap is filled by Walter Tubbs in a poem succinctly entitled “Beyond Perls:”

If I just do my thing and you do yours,
We stand in danger of losing each other
And ourselves.
I am not in this world to live up to your expectations;

But I am in this world to confirm you
As a unique human being.
And to be confirmed by you.
We are fully ourselves only in relation to each other.
The I detached from a Thou
Disintegrates.
I do not find you by chance;
I find you by an active life
Of reaching out.
Rather than passively letting things happen to me,
I can act intentionally to make them happen.
I must begin with myself, true;
But I must not end with myself:
The truth begins with two.

I have been known to add to this, “Followed by a few, and then a whole slew.”
Yes, the truth begins with two, but does not necessarily end with two. This we
affirm every time we sing “Blessed be the tie that binds our hearts in Christian
love.”

Recall, please, that it’s *agape* I am talking about here. It’s not *eros* or *philo*. And
when I think about where in our daily lives the practice of love like that of a God
takes place, a God who would save everyone without the “whosoever believes in
me” caveat...when I think about where that kind of unconditional love might be
found, I think of a parent’s love for her or his children. That’s not erotic love or
brotherly love...perhaps it makes some sense, then, that Jesus, who grew up in a
paternalistic culture addressed the Creator as “Father.” Perhaps it makes some
sense, then, that some of us can speak and sing about a “Mother/Father God.”

Let me reinforce my message with one more quote from John Powell. He says,
“There is no third possibility: love is either conditional or unconditional. Either I
attach conditions to my love or I do not. To the extent that I do attach such

conditions, I do not really love. ... I am only offering an exchange, not a gift. And true love (and here I would include *eros* and *philo*, too)...true love is and must always be a free gift.”

Recalling the “whosoever believeth in me” caveat, hear these words of Robert T. Weston. (I’m sorry I can’t give you the exact source of these words. They appear in a responsive reading that I clipped from somewhere at some time. Weston, a dynamic minister at the First Unitarian Church in Louisville, Kentucky in the 1950s wrote, “Love is so beautiful, and yet we are afraid: How can we trust where we are not trusted or where our trust is abused? Here is the challenge of great religion; for this the great teachers lived and died: that we should know how to live from the beauty of love given without expectation of return, and to trust the spark of spirit in others which is never extinguished but by death.”

Perhaps with John 3:16 in mind, Weston goes on to note that “we have placed an insistence on true belief where love should be. Let us have the courage,” he says, “to tear down the walls of our insecurity; to return trust for distrust, love for hate, compassion for fear. Oh, that we might learn to trust as we would be trusted; to love as we would be loved; is it not to learn and practice this discipline that we build churches?”

In Matthew Ch. 22: v.37-40, Jesus says: “You are to love the Lord your God with all your heart and all your soul and all your mind. This commandment is first and foremost. And the second is like it: You are to love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments hangs everything in the Law and the Prophets.”

Based on teachings such as this, let me suggest that the birth we celebrate on December 25th and that our Christian Eastern Orthodox sisters and brothers

celebrate on January 7th was the birth of one who is best viewed as more than a sacrificial lamb who died that we might live. Instead, let me suggest that we celebrate the birth of a member of the holy trinity who dedicated his life and ministry to teaching us how to love one another unconditionally, a man who challenged the legalistic traditions of Judaism by telling his listeners that all the laws of God can be fulfilled and subsumed and elevated into two great commandments that tell us to love! In my view, Jesus was one who taught of a kingdom of love rather than a kingdom of laws. May I suggest, along with Robert T. Weston, that this is a good model for building churches and religious communities. May ours remain a church where pervasive, unconditional love governs our behavior and our work together, where ours are I-Thou relationships with intentional reaching out rather than isolated detachment. “I must begin with myself, true;/But I must not end with myself:/The truth begins with two.” Thus may it be. Amen?