

STRANGERS TO LOVE

If I were a visitor sitting in the congregation this morning, this sermon title might worry me just a little bit. I might wonder if the minister was about to sic the entire congregation onto me. It might be a little unsettling to think about what could happen after the Benediction: all the people crowding around me, shaking my hand, prying into my personal affairs, fighting over who would get the privilege of inviting me over for dinner – and of course, ultimately twisting my arm to get me to join the church.

If there are any visitors here this morning, let me reassure you that there is no need to dash for the nearest exit. The chances of your having to endure such a loving onslaught are very slim. Perhaps we should add that this is a shame; that this is one of the flaws in our Congregational heritage. Our Pilgrim forebears were deeply emotional on the inside, but mostly reserved and self-contained on the outside. We have a divided chancel area and we display paraments and a cross, so we are slowly moving on from our Congregational traditions. But “warm and fuzzy” is still seldom used to describe us.

Nevertheless, our Scripture passage for this morning makes it clear that a stranger who comes among a group of Christians ought to have to endure a loving onslaught. The fact remains that most of the members who already belong here did not receive any such greeting when they first came, and consequently they do not know how to create any such greeting for those who come now.

It is quite likely that several people will speak to you politely. Someone may even ask where you live and what you do, and even wonder if you might have any mutual acquaintances. But if you do not find any real connection points fairly quickly, the chances are that the conversation will be fairly brief – often a relief to both of you. The chances of anyone really trying to find out who you are or what inspires the life within you, inviting you to dinner, or ever bringing up the subject of the church or the possibility of your wanting to be part of it – nothing like that is very likely to happen.

Yet some of the members here are full of surprises. I can no longer swear in blood that you will not have to fend off any serious loving approaches. Today I can only say that it is not likely. And it is not that we mean to let you off so easily; it is that we are not sure how

to go about such things. Most of us have some idea about how to act *friendly*, but love is quite a different category. In many circumstances, we do not know *how* to be truly loving. We ourselves are strangers to love. That is, loving is strange to us. We are still learning how to love each other, never mind having any confidence or competence in knowing how to love strangers.

So no matter how much we would like to be able to love you and teach you about loving, the most we can say is, “Come and learn how *with* us.” This is not an empty statement. One thing that is true of us is that we really *mean* to learn how.

On the other hand, love is not the simple thing we used to imagine. It turns out that only God knows how to love truly. So we have to learn about love from God. Or more accurately, we have to find ways to let God’s love flow into and through us. Not surprisingly, I suppose, love is a far bigger topic than we at first imagined. There are all kinds of substitutes and counterfeits in the culture around us. Every time we get attracted to one of the easier substitutes, it throws us off track for a while. Then, as we say, we have to *repent* and head back to God. That sounds easy, but sometimes it takes us quite a long time.

Watching and listening to Jesus often helps to get us back on track. But His kind of love is also deep and scary from our point of view. So we do not talk about love as much as we used to. That is, as our respect for *Christian* love grows, we do not bandy the word about as easily as we used to. Our society is forever talking about “love,” but in ways so shallow and generic that there is very little content left in it.

If somebody says to me “I love you,” does that mean I can trust them with my life? That’s what it means when Jesus says it. But that’s not always what it means when I say it. Yet I keep wanting my love to be closer and closer to what Jesus shows us, says, and means.

I am just saying that around here, we are still learning about “love” – and we know it. We are supposed to know that God loves us, and that is supposed to enable us to love each other. That is the long and short of the Gospel. But we also realize that while it is the long and the short, it is not the easy or the simple. In fact, it raises more issues and more real-life questions than we ever meant to sign up for.

Lots of people around us say that “love is the greatest thing in the world.” Many of them claim that love is more precious than money or fame; more important than security or anything else. Quite a few of them get a lump in their throat and a tear in their eye when love is clearly mentioned or illustrated. “All the world loves a lover,” it is said, and all the world approves of love. But not when Jesus loves us; that ends in a terrible death.

A devastating disconnect! Do I really want to learn to love like Jesus loved? Do I really pray for God to use my life in the service of *His* kind of love? I keep trying to say yes. I keep wanting to be teachable and willing. But it is also clear to me that I still have a great deal to learn about love. And I still have a great deal to learn about how much God loves me.

Much as I might like to count myself among the world’s great lovers – Christianly speaking – it just will not add up. We have a great hunger to be loved and a great desire to be loving, but except for a few wonderful instances here and there, we are clumsy novices. We would like to be experts, but we are only in love’s kindergarten. Love is bigger than we thought, and in many ways different from what we imagined. And to tell the worst of it, love is intricately bound up with faith and discipline; with prayer and study; with experimenting and risk; with mistakes and suffering and never quitting.

One real glimpse at the Lord of Love – and the Kingdom to which He is calling us – and it is difficult to understand how we could ever have imagined that the simplex definitions of love going on all around us could ever have been mistaken for what Jesus was talking about and demonstrating before us. Everywhere we look, we see a world that is aching and in anguish precisely *because* it does not know how to receive love or how to be loving. The signs are everywhere: divorce courts; prisons; race riots; religious people threatening to destroy each other; animals going extinct; nations wishing they could destroy each other without sustaining too much damage themselves. And some of us are eager to talk about a *New Covenant*, when we have little comprehension or respect for the Covenant that comes before it.

But I need to be careful not to imply that there is no love here at all. God is still at work here. There are many signs of the Kingdom in the midst of us. People do receive and give love that is genuine, deep, and real. Most of us would not have lasted very long here without bits

and pieces of genuine love getting through to us. When it comes to the genuine article, even “a little goes a long way,” as we sometimes say. Some imperfect people have loved us a lot, and our gratitude fuels our souls enough for us to go on with our own pilgrimage.

Even so, we need to get closer to the Source. So we gather in His Name, and we try not to forget why we are here. Love is the product of this corporation. If we do not produce it, we run in the red. If we run in the red long enough, we will go out of business. If we run at breakeven, we can survive a little longer, but the Boss will not be happy about it. That is what our Scripture passage told us point-blank this morning. If we are not learning how to love more all the time, God is not getting enough return on his investment. There is not enough profit. You all like to get a return on *your* investments; were you not made in the image of God?

Luckily we have a Boss who knows His business inside and out and from the ground up. The more we do things the way He showed us, the faster we can increase production. But we must stop trying to make do with substitutes. Without our Boss’s know-how and experience, quite frankly, we don’t have a prayer. But with our Boss’s help, there is no question about it: we will become more and more productive.

Do not think I made any of this up – because I did not. It is right out of the manual. Every branch that bears no fruit gets cut off. Every branch that *does* bear fruit will get pruned so it can bear even more fruit. Apart from Him, we can do nothing. But if we abide in Him, we *will* bear fruit. A flat-out promise.

The mandate for our company is clear: “*This is my commandment: that you love one another, as I have loved you. Watch how I do it. Know what happened to you because of my love for you, and then follow my lead.*”

I am not suggesting that we have not come a long way, that we are not glad to be here, or that I think we are in danger of resting on any laurels. But it *does* happen. It’s incredible how many churches end up deciding that with God, anything goes; that God does not care about profits; that we can dub around without discipline or direction and still keep producing the rarest, the most needed, the most precious commodity in all the world: love.

It should not surprise us to realize that the principles of God have application across the board and in all areas of life. Humans do not become expert farmers by reciting “I believe in wheat.” The providence of the Creator is found in cultivating and planting and harvesting – a lot of hard work. Time and labor and experience bring with them new ways to do it better and with increased yield. “If we stay on the vine, we will bear much fruit.” But it still requires pruning, among other things.

We are not going to become great lovers by just talking about it or by reciting ancient formulas. In fact, it is more difficult and more demanding to produce love than it is to produce wheat. We have a lot to learn and a long way to go. We have many mistakes to make and to learn from. Our research groups – Disciple Bands, we call them – come onto many precepts and instructions that need to be tested out. And Satan loves to slow us down by convincing some of us that our gatherings are not really very important, and therefore we need not give them enough priority to keep showing up regularly.

Perhaps sometime soon, more and more of us will be willing to admit that this business of love and loving is not just another pleasant pastime, but a matter of life and death.