

Message for May 10, 2009

Big Love

There are few emotions which touch nerves like the feeling we call "love." It's one of many amazing tools we have at our disposal which help us communicate with one another as humans...our emotions are signals as to what we're feeling, and some of us tend to more skilled at using them than others. Love tops the list as the emotion which makes the greatest impact in all of our lives, and we spend millions of dollars seeking it, understanding it, and keeping it, it means that much to us. Love is big business, within us and without; we know as humans, we all need love in some form to be whole.

When I think about it, I find there are many types of love – but we run the danger of taking the notion of love to extremes and the meaning of the word, "love" can be diluted with over- or mis-use: there is love between humans, and love of country. We say we love ice cream and pizza, and we also say we love our pets. We say we love good music, sunsets on the beach and we love to look young or beautiful. Some of us love having lots of money or fancy cars, love movie or entertainment stars, and love getting even. As you can see, while the emotion of love connects us to one another in so many ways, a casual use of the word takes some of that punch away – “love” gets demoted, categorized, reduced to refrigerator sayings and catchy phrases on advertisements.

Today we honor one specific type - Motherly Love – and I couldn't resist going a little deeper into it before I looked at the Scripture for today. The "hearts and roses" day our country celebrates as Mother's Day is in many ways very different than it was intended years ago when it was first proposed; pacifist and writer of the lyrics for the "The Battle Hymn of the Republic", Julia Ward Howe was the first to propose a "mother's day" in the United States, in her "Mother's Day Proclamation" of 1870. Beginning with...

*Arise, then, women of this day!
Arise, all women who have hearts,
Whether our baptism be of water or of tears!*

...this proclamation was written not to honor moms, but to call all women to use their influence and strength to help shape political change – it was offered in direct response to the countless deaths as a result of the Civil War in America and the Franco-Prussian War in Europe. A mother's love, tied to a son or brother or husband who no longer walked the earth, could rise up, gather forces with other women of similar experiences, and demand change. Such love, encouraged and backed by the will to do God's way, screamed for justice in a time when a woman's voice was expected to be soft, comforting and in the background.

Twenty-plus years later in 1907, Anna Jarvis wanted to honor her mother who'd been dead for two years; she set about to create a holiday so that others could

also honor their mothers, and after some dedicated groundwork, Mother's Day became nationally recognized in the US in 1914. If you were to do a Google search on Mother's Day, you'd find that many countries in the world also celebrate a form of Mother's Day at various times, so the idea must have been a worthy one. This Mother's Day is more recognizable to us – soon after, printed greeting cards and boxes of candy became the acceptable offerings of thanks for motherly love from appreciative children, and the celebration we recognize today evolved from these early roots. Interestingly enough in the 1920s, Anna found the practice of giving printed greeting cards and boxes of candy as gifts offensive, and so began a campaign against Mother's Day. As she said, "A printed card means nothing except that you are too lazy to write to the woman who has done more for you than anyone in the world. And candy! You take a box to Mother—and then eat most of it yourself. A pretty sentiment!"

Well, a sad irony is that Anna never married and never became a mother because she had no children of her own; she and her sister Ellsinore died in poverty because they'd spent all their inheritance money on the new cause. An idea born of appreciation and love grew out of control – maybe because the focus shifted to more “external” values instead of the original thought. And things aren't much different now than they were in Anna's time – like many other holidays, we tend to go overboard with how to show our love and appreciation; manufacturing companies rake it in during our growing list of holidays because many of us feel the pressure to give more and more each year.

So the question occurs to me; what is it about love that makes us all react so strongly? What is love really supposed to look like – and how does love as we know it connect to God?

Our scripture passage today is pretty specific about the relationship between Love and God...and what that looks like. John (the Apostle or the Evangelist – there is debate as to which John actually wrote all the books attributed to him in the Bible), leaves little room for question here:

“Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God; everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love... Beloved, since God loved us so much, we also ought to love one another. No one has ever seen God; if we love one another, God lives in us, and his love is perfected in us. By this we know that we abide in him and he in us, because he has given us of his Spirit.”

Few of us would argue with this, especially those of us who already feel the Spirit in God. As little kids in Sunday school, we all heard that “God is Love” and pulled it deeply into our hearts. We carry the Spirit's Love everywhere we go – it mixes in with our daily lives and spills over into other activities where we interact with one another in our faith community. Anytime we're all together, we can see the fact that God is Love – and like a magnet, it draws us together to reinforce

itself; if we allow the love we feel for one another to work its magic in our faith community, we experience a oneness that gives us courage and strength to go one step further. Currently, it seems to me that we are relearning how to love and support each other; God is at the center of what we do, and God's love is beaming back and forth among us. We're aglow with it, and the hope it brings is something others can feel when they visit. God loves us, we know it, and we're happy to share it with anyone who comes into our space. This is an amazing time in our church life...

Things get a little more challenging later on in this passage, though.

“And we have seen and do testify that the Father has sent his Son as the Savior of the world. God abides in those who confess that Jesus is the Son of God, and they abide in God.”

Hmmm...God abides in those who confess that Jesus is the Son of God and they abide in God. Does this mean that if you don't believe in Jesus, but you do believe in God, that God doesn't love you – that you don't love properly? I have to tell you that I've heard this very statement made from the pulpit more than once – and it always bothered me, because it felt like it excluded a whole world of people who believe in God, but don't necessarily think Jesus is God's Son – yet. The Jews believe in God and also have a healthy respect for Jesus as a Prophet. What about them? And what about all the others who name Allah as the beginning of life and love, and who live so many of the beliefs we do which are called by different names?

I don't think God intended for this part of the scripture to separate us from others any more than that we recognize where our love of and from God comes together – we acknowledge that Jesus is the Christ, and our Savior. It is a statement of our faith, and while it is meant to clarify things for an early church so that they might be more comfortable with the differences between them and their contemporaries (which meant life and death to many of them at this time in Infant Christianity), I'd like to think that for our purposes today, we Christians (and we UCC folk) recognize other belief systems and allow room for them to coexist with ours. We are all God's Children and loved by God – some of us put it in different clothing with accents.

Toward the end of this particular passage, though, John gets down and dirty with the expectation of just what we're supposed to do with God's Love...

“Love has been perfected among us in this: that we may have boldness on the Day of Judgment, because as he is, so are we in this world. There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear; for fear has to do with punishment, and whoever fears has not reached perfection in love. We love because he first loved us. Those who say, “I love God,” and hate their brothers or sisters, are liars; for those who do not love a brother or sister

whom they have seen, cannot love God whom they have not seen. The commandment we have from him is this: those who love God must love their brothers and sisters also.

Here, John is saying, “Listen up, you who say you believe! God’s love is perfect in you, and it gives you strength, not fear! If you’re afraid, then you haven’t really accepted God’s amazing love yet. But if you have accepted God’s Love, you need to give that love to others – even those you don’t know. God commands you to love everyone, because if you can’t love people around you that you can see, then how can you love a God that you can’t?”

Busted! Just when we were feeling good about what we are and how we live and love God, John sticks it to us. It’s really pretty easy to love people who act and think a lot like you do – there’s comfort in being with friends and family of the same belief system, who share your space and pockets of your lives. And, being comfortable actually can bring people into the fold. We know folks who have gone out of their way to tell me how good it feels to be in this church when they visit - Jean Arvin’s family was very vocal about how it felt to sit in our church and be with our church family – they understood why it meant so much to her. So, I have a feeling we do pretty well with the first two sections of our Scripture reading for today.

But in this last section that challenges us to love everyone if we say we love God – I have to admit that I struggle with this part, and I bet many of you do, too. “Everyone” means the whole world – “everyone” means people who aren’t of the same political party, people who are homeless and dirty or stinky, people who rape and kill, people who hurt other people. “Everyone” leaves no room for, “Yeah, but what about?” “Everyone” means all the people of the world – all of God’s Children – no exceptions.

And this is the true measure of what we profess as our belief in the United Church of Christ – this is what brought me to the denomination in the first place. It’s written on all documents that leave our church – “No matter who you are or where you are on life’s journey, you are welcome here.” What a great invitation! To be welcoming is the first step to offering love – when we invite people to walk through the doors to share time, space, worship, a meal of forgiveness, and we tell them that we don’t care about other details in their lives, we’re offering them what’s known as “extravagant love.” God-Love...Big Love...the best kind of love. The kind people relate to and need – like motherly love.

I believe that the family I share this church house with – the family who has come through some very challenging days and who is now growing stronger each day - who is ready to demonstrate that God’s Love is thriving in this church - is now also ready to take anyone in, because God told us to do it. The challenge for us today is to step outside our comfort level a little bit more, and to extend that invitation even more obviously to the outside world of Prescott, Arizona. Our

survival depends upon all of us taking this next step toward the future. While you've asked me to help this church grow, and I believe I have some good ideas as to how we can do this...in the coming weeks, I'll be sharing them with you, and asking you to help me put them into motion, because I can't do it alone. I know I'll get the support of my family to make things work and I know we have so much to offer the world, through God's Love that lives inside each of us.

1st John says, "***We love because he first loved us.***" The time has come for us to get to work and fearlessly share God's Love – Big Love – Our Love.

Amen.