

Love Life  
Matthew 18:15-20 Romans 13:8-14

I'm sure most of us are familiar with that classic hit song of the Beatles, "All You Need Is Love." A catchy tune and a simple message, "love is all you need." When we think of love, we often think of the warm fuzzies we get from romantic love, or love of our children and family. Songs like these often make us smile and remember those warm interactions from our lives. Love is often an important part of our lives, and when we are lacking in love, we often struggle.

The importance of love also carries into our faith lives. In the Judeo-Christian tradition, love is often equated with the Divine. The theme "God is love" is found throughout the epistles of the New Testament.

Yet the love referenced in the scriptures is more than the warmth we feel for another. It actually is focused entirely on another. Called agape love, it is solely concerned with the well-being of others. It is being willing to make sacrifices yourself for the welfare of another.

Certainly it is not exclusive of other forms of love. When we love our partner or our family, we are usually willing to make sacrifices to ensure their well-being. Yet agape love really is about the other person. It's being able to let go of your own self-interest and to attend to the needs of another.

Our gospel lesson this morning illustrates the interaction between the love we are called to and our relationships with others. Written during the growth of the early church, the gospel writer recognizes the reality of conflict in the church, and how that discord can affect the body as a whole.

It's important to understand that this isn't just a disagreement over points of view or perspectives. Those kinds of disagreements are just a fact of life in a world full of unique

individuals who see the world from their own understanding, based on their life experiences and circumstances.

What is referenced here is something more serious. To sin against someone is to in some way cause them harm. This is more than just a common argument, this is action that will cause the offended party to suffer in some way. This is behavior that threatens the stability of the community itself.

It's an acknowledgment that while we may be called to suffer at the hands of the secular world for our faith, the body of Christ should be something in contrast to what the world has to offer, a place of safety and security. And when that sanctuary is threatened by a member of the body, the situation needs to be addressed.

Unfortunately, this passage has been used too often throughout history as a guidebook for punitive discipline by the authorities of the church. Our own Anabaptist tradition has a long history of enacting the "ban" or "shunning" against those who fail to follow our doctrine and practices, being seen as threats to the rules and regulations that ensure conformity and unity. However, what is being addressed here is a much more personal focus.

This looks at the perspective of one individual directly leading to harm against another, whether physical, emotional, or spiritual. Behavior that, if allowed to continue, will cause further harm, and could impact the larger community.

However, is this "shunning" procedure, as it has become over time, really meant to be the church's punitive process - or is that the easier way out, to just cast aside the problem?...To interpret this as a punitive process is to lose its original intent or perspective...

In first century Palestine, honor was everything. It determined one's place in society and one's acceptance by others. To publicly shame someone was to make them outcasts and could affect their families for generations. Recognizing this, our gospel instructs us to try to resolve this one on one. To take the offender aside and express the harm they have caused, and seek restoration and redemption. Then to just involve a few others if that is unsuccessful. It is only after multiple attempts at resolution do you involve the entire community and risk shame. And even if redemption is not found at that point, the result is not to ostracize and banish them permanently from the fold.

Our scripture tells us that if all attempts have failed, they should be as "a pagan or an unbeliever", in other words, a Gentile, or a "tax collector." Does that mean they are to be driven away and separated from us? I think we would be hard-pressed to make that argument in light of who Jesus chose to spend his time with. He was frequently in the company of tax collectors and Gentiles. There was no one beyond his love and compassion, reflecting the love and grace of our Creator. If anything, he spent more time with them because they were in greater need of that caring love...

Because that's what it ultimately boils down to - agape love.

Letting go of your own desire for retribution/retaliation/revenge to instead work at redeeming another...Forgiveness at its finest. The implication, however, is not that you accept the harmful actions of another, but that you do not let it replace your concern for the other, that you seek the restoration of the other which leads to their redemption and acknowledgment of how their actions have caused harm.

Christian forgiveness is not easy, but essential not only for the other, but just as much for yourself. Letting go of bitterness lifts the burden off your own soul yet doesn't absolve the other of accountability. This entire process is focused on being accountable, but through love and redemption, not retribution and revenge.

Paul reinforces this love focus in our reading from Romans this morning. He tells us that “He who loves his fellowman has fulfilled the law...Love does no harm to its neighbor”...Have we really committed ourselves to that criteria as the body of Christ today?

Do our actions reflect love, or do they lead to harm?

The church today is certainly not without its disagreements and division. The viewpoints expressed reflect a wide spectrum of theological and interpretive perspectives. Even in Jesus’ time, the Jewish faith was far from uniform in belief and ideology. There’s a reason we know the terms Pharisee, Sadducee, Essene, scribe, etc. These were all groups of different perspectives within the Jewish faith. Groups that often had lively debates with each other, and within their own groups.

There is a rich tradition of discussion and debate within the history of Judaism. So, it is natural for our own tradition and the early church to follow suit. But there is a difference between arguing the finer points of theology and biblical interpretation, and actions that lead to causing harm, or “sinning against” another. When your ideology leads to the injury of another, you have crossed that line. It is no longer about love.

Unfortunately, too often we have allowed such perspectives to cause harm under the guise of being tolerant. However, such “tolerance” often leads to “intolerance,” and “exclusion,” hurt and harm. When we think of the issues that divide the church today, do we focus on the hurt caused or the tolerance of the argument? Do we pull those aside who promote hurtful doctrine as Matthew 18 instructs? Is our focus on ourselves or on the needs of the other?

Nobody likes conflict. We all yearn for unity and uniformity. It makes things so much easier and more comfortable. But it comes at a cost. Someone pays a price. A cost they shouldn’t have to count within the body of Christ. And sadly, unlike the direction of our

Matthew 18 scripture, we let them be excluded, we let them walk away, injured and without justice, instead of seeking to redress and redeem those who caused them harm.

“Do we practice what we preach...where is the love?” When the church today is faced with hurtful conflict, how do we react? Is our focus love, or is it something else?

I hope and pray we choose the same lens as our Savior, the one who taught us what love really means, and what forgiveness and redemption truly imply. Amen.