

## “Just Love”

Romans 13:8-14

Matthew 18:15-22

February 15, 2009

GR FUMC (8:30 only)

One week before Valentine’s Day, 24 years ago, my husband and I decided to get married. The big question for me was not *when* to get married – that was pretty much decided by our families’ and churches’ calendars. It was not even *whether* this was the right guy – I was 26 years old, old enough to know a good catch when I saw one. The big question for me was “Is this man really worth giving away my cats for?”

I was a cat person. The first think I did upon getting a job and my own apartment after seminary was adopt two kittens. Greg was a dog person. Not because he was crazy about dogs so much as because he was allergic to cats. *Really* allergic to cats. So the choice was him...or the cats. His mother predicted the cats would win. But she was wrong.

It is true that dog people and cat people are very different, just as dogs and cats are. The following story of the creation of America’s two favorite domesticated animals was reported to have been discovered in the Dead Sea Scrolls... by highly unreliable sources.

And Adam said, “Lord, when I was in the garden, you walked with me every day. Now I do not see you anymore. I am lonesome here, and it is difficult for me to remember how much you love.” And God said, “No problem! I will create a companion for you that will be with you forever and will be a reflection of my love for you, so that you will know I love you, even when you cannot see me. Regardless

of how selfish and childish and unlovable you may be, this new companion will accept you as you are and will love you as I do, in spite of yourself.”

And God created a new animal to be a companion for Adam. And it was a good animal. And God was pleased.

And the new animal was pleased to be with Adam and wagged his tail.

And Adam said, “But Lord, I have already named all the animals in the kingdom and all the good names are taken.”

And God said, “No problem! Because I have created this new animal to be a reflection of my love for you, his name will be a reflection of my own name, and you will call him DOG.”

And Dog lived with Adam and was a companion to him and loved him.

And Adam was comforted. And God was pleased. And Dog was content and wagged his tail.

After a while, it came to pass that Adam’s guardian angel came to the Lord and said, “Lord, Adam has become filled with pride. He struts and preens like a peacock and he believes he is worthy of adoration. Dog has indeed taught him that he is loved, but no one has taught him humility.”

And the Lord said, “No problem! I will create a companion who will be with him forever and who will see him as he is. The companion will remind him of his limitations, so he will know that he is not worthy of adoration.”

And God created CAT to be a companion to Adam. And Cat would not obey Adam.

And when Adam gazed into Cat's eyes, he was reminded that he was not the supreme being. And Adam learned humility.

And God was pleased. And Adam was greatly improved. And Cat did not care one way or the other.

According to this not-so-ancient legend, dogs and cats were created to teach us certain key virtues: assurance of God's love...and humility. In today's passage from Paul's Letter to the Romans (a document that really is part of the Bible!) Paul is trying to convince the people of the church in Rome that living out other key virtues is part of what it means to be Christian:

Owe no one anything, except to love one another.... The commandments...are summed up in this word: Love your neighbor as yourself."

According to Paul, loving our neighbors means that we do and don't do certain things. He lists the things we don't do: revelry, drunkenness, promiscuity, immorality. Christian living is not found in quarreling or jealousy, or other works of "darkness." We live in the daytime, in the light, he says. In fact, we are to "put on" the light, as if we were putting on a suit of armor. The light we put on is our Lord Jesus Christ, who both protects and strengthens us.

If we are going to live in the way that Paul describes in his Letter to the Romans, if we are going to live and work together without being quarrelsome or jealous, if we are going to clothe ourselves in Christ so that, in effect, we *become* Christ for one another – then it will be necessary for us to learn how to forgive one another.

Forgiveness is an essential part of love. Ask any couple celebrating their 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary, or even their 24<sup>th</sup>. Forgiveness is also an essential part of Christian love. Just look at the way Jesus carries out his ministry. How often should we forgive? As many as seven times?’ ‘Not seven times,’ says Jesus ‘but, I tell you, seventy-seven times.’

Forgiveness is an essential part of love, whether in a loving partnership or in a church community, but it is not the only element of love that is needed for a long life together. Before he speaks to Peter about the endless amount of forgiveness that is needed, Jesus speaks to his disciples about the boundaries that need to be maintained for a long life together:

If another member of the church sins against you, go and point out the fault when the two of you are alone. If you are not listened to, take one or two others along with you, so that every word may be confirmed by the evidence of two or three witnesses. If the member refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if the offender refuses to listen even to the church, let such a one be to you as a Gentile and a tax-collector.

Alongside Paul’s admonition to “love one another,” and next to the many, many examples in the Gospels of Jesus’ repeated offers of forgiveness, here we have Jesus saying, “There is a point beyond which we must say ‘stop. This behavior will not be accepted this community. It is time to go.’”

In other words, forgiveness is essential, but forgiveness is not the same as condoning. To condone something is to allow it to continue. To forgive someone is to help them take the first step towards repentance. “Repentance” in Greek is “metanoia”; it means “to turn around.”

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the German Lutheran theologian and pastor executed by the Nazis in 1945, coined the term “cheap grace” to talk about forgiveness given without any expectation of changed behavior. “Cheap grace,” he wrote, “is the preaching of forgiveness without requiring repentance, baptism without church discipline, Communion without confession.... Cheap grace is grace without discipleship, grace without the cross, grace without Jesus Christ....”

Forgiveness is part of the Christian life, but not “cheap” forgiveness, not “easy” love, not “just love.” Christian forgiveness is forgiveness that leads to repentance; mercy that leads to change; love that is willing to confront destructive behavior, lay out the consequences and stick to them. Christian love is love that works with justice. It is Just love.

Just love isn’t easy. Most of the time it’s easier simply to forgive and forget. Of course, that usually means “try to forgive, almost never forget.” For most people it’s easier to avoid talking about the offending issue, or to the offending person. But Jesus will have none of that. “Go,” he says, “go and point out the fault when the two of you are alone. If that doesn’t work, ask others to help you.” Just love is not easy. It’s not easy for parents or spouses or friends or co-workers. It’s not easy, but it’s the life we are called to lead.

Pat Spier, a missionary in Japan for eight years, wrote about her experience with Just love in her denomination’s newsletter.

After we had just moved to a new neighborhood in Kyoto, I went out one day with our 6 year old daughter, Naomi, to get the mail. In the mailbox was a handwritten note (in Japanese, of course) addressed first to Naomi and then to all of us, obviously

written by a child. “You stink and you are scum. I hate you.” The note went on like that, and then at the bottom it said in a childish scrawl, “This was written by an adult.” The next day, another note appeared. And the next day. I felt myself in a rather delicate position; I had just moved in, and didn’t want to say anything offensive in my less-than-perfect Japanese.

I went to the neighboring home of a little girl. As her mother look at the notes, one having just been found a few minutes earlier) she paled and said that her daughter *had* been writing something and had left the house with it.

Thirty minutes later, the mother, dragging her weeping 7 year old, appeared at our doorstep. We spent the next twenty minutes, at the mother’s insistence, waiting for the daughter to stop crying and say, “I’m sorry.” Our daughter Naomi was standing there too, and after the “I’m sorry” finally got mumbled, Naomi gave Nori, the 7 year old, a little beaded ring she happened to have in her pocket. We received no more hate mail, and within two days Naomi and Nori became best friends.

Two days before we left Japan, the mother and I were again talking in the small street between our two houses. Suddenly she said to me, “Remember that time with Nori? When you first moved here? Oh, thank goodness you are Christ.”

Of course, I said to myself, she means that I’m Christian. She’s not Christian herself and she doesn’t know the right terms or the difference between Christ and Christian.

“Oh that could have been terrible,” she went on. “Thank goodness you are Christ! If you hadn’t been Christ, you would never have forgiven us and we would not have been

friends. It would have been miserable for us during these years. Thank goodness you are Christ!”

“Put on the armor of light. Put on the Lord Jesus Christ.” As we wear Christ, we bear Christ, and, in a very real sense, we *are* Christ for others. As we wrap ourselves in Jesus Christ, he takes charge of our lives for his good purposes.

Have thine own way, Lord, have thine own way.

Thou are the potter, I am the clay.

Mold me and make me, after thy will,

While I am waiting, yielding and still.

Have thine own way, Lord, have thine own way.

Hold o'er my being absolute sway.

Fill with thy Spirit till all shall see.

Christ only, always, living in me.