

What's Love Got to Do with It? "A Love that Bears Fruit"

1 John 4:7-21

John 15:1-8

May 17, 2009

GR FUMC

When he was a young student pastor, Quaker minister and author Philip Gulley was hired in the summer of 1986 by a small rural congregation in Indiana.

The first couple of months with went well. It was the proverbial honeymoon, he writes, both pastor and church each proclaimed fondness for the other loudly and often. There was give and take on both their parts. They preferred their hymns aged like a fine wine, so he didn't suggest they clap their hands, buy a drum set, or sing lyrics projected on a screen. They discovered he was soft-spoken, so they bought a new microphone rather than insist that he shout.

But in the third month, something Pastor Gulley mentioned in a sermon caught the attention of a woman in the church. She approached him after church and asked whether he believed in Satan and hell. Being young and new, he lacked the ministerial radar that warns the more experienced preacher of approaching danger. Eager to prove his theological sophistication, he answered directly and honestly. No, he didn't believe in Satan, nor in a place where people were endlessly tormented. Gulley assured the woman that she was perfectly free to believe those ideas, patted her hand and turned to speak to someone else. He and his wife left church that day grateful that God had called them to such a warm fellowship, unaware that they'd soon feel its heat.

The next Sunday was Palm Sunday. The pastor prepared his sermon on how quickly the crowd in Jerusalem went from cheering Jesus to jeering him. It turned out to be a timely sermon. The chair of the church council approached him as he entered the

church. “We’re not holding church this morning,” he said. “We’d like to meet with you instead.”

But a minister with a sermon in hand is an unstoppable force of nature, and Gulley persuaded the council chairman that worship should take place before the meeting. After the last hymn was sung and the benediction given, the pastor and the grim-faced members of the church council filed downstairs.

“This is an awkward matter,” the chairman said, “but I’m afraid we’re going to have to let you go. There have been concerns raised that you don’t believe in Satan and hell.” “That’s right,” Gulley said, “do you want to know why?” They declined his offer to enlighten them. “I do believe in the love of God,” he said, beginning to panic. “Isn’t that enough?” It wasn’t.

After the meeting, Gulley walked out to his car where his wife was waiting. “What happened?” she asked.

“It’s good news.”

“What is it?”

“We get to sleep in next Sunday.”

Rev. Gulley says that now, two decades later, he realizes what he didn’t understand then – beliefs matter. Beliefs are not harmless. They have the power to shape our world, for good or ill. Some beliefs unite us in a great and common good, while others divide us, reinforcing prejudices and diminishing our humanity. Religious beliefs are especially potent, shaping how we think of and act toward God, others and ourselves [Gulley and Mulholland, pp. 1-4].

I was ordained as a minister just a couple of years before the naïve Pastor Gulley was so quickly hired and fired by his congregation. If you had told me then that I would, in the course of my career, find myself repeating the same basic theological message over and over again to a deaf but desperate world, I might have given up before I started.

“God is love.” I say in my office to homosexuals towards whom Christians have been less than loving. “God is love.” I say in jail cells to those who feel completely abandoned. “God is love.” I say in hospice rooms to the dying *and* those who will outlive them. “God is love.” I say to young children, who seem to be the only ones who believe me. “God is love, God is love, God is love.” I am not a tattoo-wearing kind of woman, but if I were, that would be my pick – injected into the skin around my ankle or maybe across my cheek, Mike Tyson style.

Why is that such a hard concept for people to hang onto? Even Bible-reading, Jesus-worshipping, church-loving Christians don’t seem to let the message sink in deeply enough to really believe it when times are hard. Now to be clear, nearly everyone believes that God is loving; the doubt has to do with how much. God loves us, most of us are willing to say, but there is considerable disagreement over the width, length, height and depth of this love.

The reason, I believe, is because we use human love as a model for divine love. We take what we know about love from our own lives and experiences, and we blow it up bigger and bigger ‘til we figure we’ve arrived at a God-sized love. We project human love onto the theological screen in our minds, and we call that God’s love.

So what do we get? Just a larger, more powerful version of human love: limited, conditional, biased, self-interested love. Love that is offered to some and not to others.

Love that is offered as a reward for good behavior and is withdrawn as a punishment for bad behavior. Love that shared with the elect and bestowed upon the obedient; but denied to the outsider and the disobedient.

For many raised from infancy in church nurseries and Sunday School rooms, the divided nature of divine love was explained by attributing one kind of love to God the Father and another kind to Jesus the Son. Jesus and God were partners in a mission to save the world, but Jesus was the good cop and God was the bad cop. Jesus was “gentle, sympathetic, willing to take a bullet for his people, appealing to conscience and promising a reward for doing the right thing. God was the bad cop, standing in the background with his arms folded across his chest, glaring. As long as one responded to Jesus, God remained in the shadows.” But, should there be resistance, God would crack his knuckles and scowl. It was clear that you wouldn’t want Jesus to leave you in the room alone with God. [Gulley and Mulholland, 21]

Eventually we grow up and out of such childish understandings; we know that God is not someone to fear. We grasp, as mature Christian adults, that we are saved by grace, not by our works. And yet our inability to picture God and God’s love as more than a larger version of human love means that we still think of God’s love as conditional, dependent on something we do or don’t do. God may save us, but proper behavior keeps us saved. Once God has stamped us as “approved,” our task is to learn the teachings, “keep the rites, affirm the doctrine, and obey the rules. In turn, God writes our name in the Book of Life, prepares our heavenly mansion, and fits us for wings.” [Gulley & Mulholland, 27] God no longer wields a billy club, now God holds out a

carrot. We're not afraid of the punishment so much as we're anxious we might not get the reward.

But true religion, friends, is not about sticks or carrots, it's not about punishment or reward, it's not about earning heaven or escaping hell, it's not based on fear or anxiety. True religion is about knowing that God is love.

“God is love,” says the first letter of John, “and those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them. 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 God first loved us.”

How does he know this, this “John” whose first letter is in our Bible? Is he the same John to whom the fourth gospel is attributed? The same as the disciple who, along with Peter and James, made up Jesus’ “inner Cabinet”? The scholarly answer these days is no, probably not exactly the same, but certainly connected through the same religious community, the same school of thought. Somewhat like the Kennedy or Bush family political dynasties – not the same, but related.

And even though we call it a “letter” and it’s written as one, the First Letter of John really functions more like a commentary on the Gospel of John, a sort of sermon in literary form, reflecting on the Gospel that, itself, reflected on the life and death of Jesus.

In the late first century, when the letters of John were written, no one was thinking of God as love. How could God be love? This would seem absurd to any Greek or Roman. For them, it was intelligence or morality, not love, that defined the nature of the Divine. Aristotle said that God must be Pure Intelligence. Plato said that

God was The Good, the Good beyond Being. Where did this idea come from? Human history is surely not its source, since it is consistently marked by war and violence. Nature teaches that God is beautiful and mysterious, but not obviously loving. What compelled this author to promote this strange idea?

He came to that conclusion as he reflected on the gospel story of Jesus' life, death and resurrection. If, as the early Christians were beginning to understand, Jesus was God incarnate, "God in sandals" as John Dominic Crossan puts it, if Jesus was the fleshed-out version of the reality of God...then God must be love. Look at his message and ministry, his suffering, death and resurrection. Look at the way he embraced the poor, the lepers, the blind, the prostitutes, the children – all the people who weren't really considered people. Look at his faithfulness to them, to his disciples even when they betrayed him; look at his forgiveness of his executioners. Look at his victory over death and the new pathway to God that his resurrection created. What other conclusion could there be? Jesus is love. Jesus is God. God is love.

What does this mean for us? *Who, then, does it mean that we are?* If God-who-is-love is the vine and we are the branches, what fruit do we produce? The First Letter of John doesn't urge us to become smarter, even though intelligence is a good thing. It doesn't say we are to increase in goodness, even though being good is clearly a positive value. It doesn't say we are to grow in power or beauty, even though those, too, are highly esteemed. Instead it urges us to grow in love: Beloved, since God loved us so much, we also ought to love one another.

If God is love, then we are to be the same. If God loves, rather than rejects, the disobedient, then no bishop or pastor can justify excommunicating a parishioner. If God

loves, rather than smites the rebellious, then no husband can justify hitting his wife. If God loves, rather than destroys God's children, then no parent can justify abusing a child. If God loves us rather than dispenses punishment or reward to us, then the question we should be asking ourselves is not "If I die tonight, where will I spend eternity?" it's "If I live tomorrow, what kind of life will it be?"

Fortin de las Flores is a city in Mexico located at the foot of the mountains in the state of Veracruz. While remote from the tourist resorts, Fortin is well-situated on the highway that runs between the cities of Orizaba and Cordoba. Since ancient times, it has been a center of agriculture, producing an abundance of fruits and vegetables as well as coffee, sugar and flowers.

The people of Fortin are not wealthy or even middle class by the standards of the United States or even Mexico City. Most of them live in tiny homes built close together. Families support themselves by running a small shop or café, by teaching or working for the government, or by doing a little shoe shining, a little farming, a little construction.

Though their resources seem limited compared to the rest of North America, the people of Fortin have, for many years, welcomed the hundreds of thousands of strangers who pass through their town on the cargo trains that carry them north from Central America. They share whatever they can with the desperate migrants who huddle in the wells at the back of the cars, ride on top, or cling to the side of the train. When the trains stop, the residents of Fortin go down to the tracks and chat while handing up fruit, sandwiches, water and clothing.

If you were a member of last year's adult Sunday School that read *Enrique's Journey* by Sonia Nazario, then you are aware of the people of Fortin de las Flores. Ms

Nazario singles them out for their generosity. Recently, writer Amy Frykholm visited the town in order to understand where that generosity came from.

There Amy met Benita Juarez, 84 years old and matriarch of her large family. Over the years, Benita has seen thousands of economic refugees passing through her town. She has seen pregnant women, women nursing babies, and children younger than her youngest grandchild. She has seen people whose lips are parched and cracked from lack of water, people who are poorly dressed for the bitter cold air of the nearby 18,000 foot volcano. She has seen people who have been beaten, robbed and raped.

Sometimes, if the train slows down, Benita sends a grandchild to the train with a packet of food or a plastic bag filled with water to toss up. Sitting in Benita's courtyard one afternoon with many of the extended family, Amy asked them how they could afford to give to the migrants day after day, year after year. One of Benita's daughters look puzzled. "Right now, we're eating," she explained. "When we are finished, there will be a little left over. That we can pass along."

"But how do you know that you will have enough for yourselves?" Amy asked. A daughter-in-law answered "Whatever we give, God multiplies. We help because they are suffering more than we are."

It sounds like a tall order, living so that God's love can be perfected in us. But, in fact, such a life is created not by superhuman effort but by the multiple small decisions we make in our daily interactions with others. Our decisions to share or not, to accept or not, to listen or not.

After he was fired, Philip Gulley and his wife drove home and ate dinner. The phone rang later that afternoon. It was from a council member of another small rural church near their home.

“We’d like you to come be our pastor,” he said. “Are you available?”

“As a matter of fact I am,” he said.

He preached at that church the next Sunday. He wasn’t optimistic about the prospects, figuring his tenure would be brief once they found out that he believed God loved everyone. So he preached about God’s love for homosexuals, thinking it would shock them.

After worship he went downstairs to meet with the council, a familiar process by now.

“Do you believe in Satan and hell?” an older woman asked.

You’d think he’d have learned how to offer a theologically obscure response, but Gulley says he was more stubborn than intelligent. Besides, he assumed that someone at the first church had called to warn them of his heretical views. So he answered honestly once again. “No, I don’t.”

One of the men smacked the table with his hand. “I like a man who speaks his mind,” he said. “Let’s hire him.” They did, and the pastor and the congregation served God together, happily, for several years.

In retrospect, Gulley says, he’s thankful that the first church fired him. It forced him to examine his assumptions, to reflect on his experiences with God and others, and to seek answers to the questions that all of us so easily ignore or too easily resolve:

- If God is love, then how can that love be limited only to some and not to all?

- If God-who-is-love is the vine, and we are the branches, then what fruit are we to produce?
- If the fruit I produce is to share what God has given me, will I have enough for myself?
- If I live tomorrow, what kind of life will it be?

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