

John 15: 9 – 17, Love is Not an Option!
Newtonbrook United Church, May 17, 2009



Imagine that the time is later today and that you are in a car with a younger person in your family. You have been in the car for a while, on the way to a destination that takes a bit of time to drive to. The conversation has covered a lot of territory so far, beginning with "How are you?" and proceeding to the weather, and family news.

A time of quiet has happened, each of you occupied with your own thoughts.

The quiet is broken when the younger person asks another question: "Did you go to church today?"

Anyone here right now will probably respond, "Yes." – I hope!

So imagine that the younger person, an environmental activist who does not normally "go to church" asks another question; something like, "What was the Bible story."

There are several possible responses to that question, but what if you were to respond by saying that Phyliss Wilson read us a story about Jesus commanding his disciples to: "**love one another as I have loved you.**"¹ You go on to say that the sermon title indicated that LOVE IS NOT AN OPTION – it is a commandment.

There's another period of quiet in the car. You both look out at fresh green grass along the roadside, the odd fruit tree in bloom, flowerbeds adorned with late blooming tulips in a variety of colours, and you smell the freshness of new springtime life in the air.

Suddenly the question for you comes out of nowhere; "Do you love me?"

"Why of course I love you? Haven't I tried to be caring and compassionate; haven't I given up a lot for you so that you can have a good life; haven't I gone the extra mile several times, and haven't I

¹ John 15:12

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been generous to you? Haven't I always been there for you whenever you needed me? Why would you ask such a question?"

Quiet.

"Yes you have. You have done all those things for me – and more. But, you know, I'm growing up in a time when your generation has compromised the future for my generation. If you really love us, why don't you change the way you live so that the earth will be a healthy place for everyone? If you love us, if you really believe that God put you on earth so that everyone could have an abundant life – a life filled with love – why don't you change the way you treat the earth? The display on biodiversity in the new Schad Gallery at the ROM says that we are in the sixth great extinction of species in the story of the earth."

Quiet.

The younger person continues; "If your Bible tells you that all life is sacred, and that the God who you worship looked at creation and saw that it was "good"², are you living together with the earth and on the earth as if you love one another? Are you obeying the commandment in your Bible to "**choose life**"³?"

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Those are tough questions for all of us – and they are very real. We do not have to imagine them.

None of us ever intended to damage the earth.

Bill Phipps, past Moderator of our United Church of Canada and visitor to Newtonbrook United Church, writes that,

"Our earthly home is dying, or perhaps more truthfully, being murdered. Overzealous, arrogant human activity is tipping the balance to cause the earth's sickness. As the prophet Hosea declared, "The land mourns, and all who live in it languish;

² Genesis 1:10, 12, 18, 21, 25, 31

³ Deuteronomy 30:19

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*together with the wild animals and the birds of the air, even the fish of the sea are perishing.*⁴“⁵”

One could ask, “Where IS God in all of this?” What does our theology tell us?

Throughout the Bible, the earth is seen as a sacred part of God’s creation. Many of the Psalms⁶ describe our earthly home as a gift of beauty, awe, splendour, mystery, and majesty. It is our earthly home, and we are creatures of the earth. In Genesis, life begins in a garden and in the book of Revelation, at the end of our Christian scriptures, there is another garden. Both gardens have rivers of life-giving water running through them.

Jesus commands us to love one another. How can we leave a legacy of love?

One possible response is in the way that this community of faith has responded to the environmental crisis. Fritz Hull writes that what we need now is, “*a thoroughly honest and steadfast affirmation of our personal capacity to be powerful instruments of change*”⁷.

That is happening!

If you were in the car with that young person, you could tell convincing stories of how Newtonbrook United Church has acted to live with respect in creation;

- you have installed a more efficient furnace
- you are using energy star freezers and refrigerators
- recycled paper is used in your office
- some of the lighting has been changed to compact fluorescent
- you send biodegradeable materials to the municipal compost
- you have hosted 100 mile dinners to educate the congregation on the environmental impacts of our food choices
- you sell organic, Fair Trade coffee as a justice measure
- and you now have a “Green Team” that is looking at the next steps that can be done to live with respect in creation
- and, as they say on TV, much, much more!

⁴ Hosea 4:3

⁵ Very Rev. Bill Phipps in Mandate, May 2009, page 10

⁶ For example: Psalm 102:25, Psalm 98, Psalm 8, Psalm 29, Psalm 48:1,2, Psalm 104

⁷ Fritz Hull, in Earth & Spirit: the spiritual dimension of the environmental crisis, page 170

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There's no doubt that the people of Newtonbrook United Church are not here for themselves – love for others is evident in your faith and actions.

What are the next steps?

- Will it be the generation of electricity on our new roof, as they have investigated at Beach United Church?
- Will it be using solar power to heat our water, and reducing our carbon footprint even more?

American evangelical, the Rev. Brian McLaren, writes a response to the question, "Why Am I Green?", McLaren says; *"The more we as Christians follow Jesus by thinking in terms of our duty to our neighbours "downstream" in space and time, the more we will take our stewardship of creation seriously.*⁸

Diana Butler Bass, who has studied thriving mainline Christian congregations in the United States says that, "lively faith is not located in buildings, programs, organizations, and structures. Rather, spiritual vitality lies in human beings; it is located in the heart of God's people and the communities they form."⁹ I would say that faith here at Newtonbrook United Church is centred in love, caring for others, and caring for the earth!

Lively faith is life-giving. It is centred on the commandment to:
"Love one another as I have loved you."

To love one another as Jesus has loved does mean loving those who, according to McLaren, live downstream in space and time. Fritz Hull says that this involves moving from a worldview that is anthropocentric to one that is "biocentric"¹⁰.

That is not an option for those who wish to be disciples of Jesus. As the Very Rev. Peter Short says, the task of the disciple is to learn the craft of the Master. How we love this planet, is an example of how we love both present and future generations.

"That which we love we will protect, defend, and heal"¹¹.

⁸ Brian McLaren The Green Bible, page I49

⁹ Diana Butler-Bass, Christianity for the Rest of Us, page 6

¹⁰ Fritz Hull, in Earth & Spirit: the spiritual dimension of the environmental crisis, page 178

¹¹ Fritz Hull, in Earth & Spirit: the spiritual dimension of the environmental crisis, page 180

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We are sharing love, as Jesus commanded, when we care for the world that God created for us to live in. I see God being present in that love that is positive energy that creates life, nurtures life, and blesses life.

#599 – Living Christ, Bring Us Love

Prayers for God's Family and Creation – May 17, 2009

Gracious God, Creator of heaven and earth,
Giver of love and of joy,
we give you thanks that Jesus has called his disciples to be his friends. We pray that we may be inspired to think of your creation as our friend, and that we may live with respect in this part of your wonderful world.

Loving God, all people in every part of your world are bound together by your non-judgmental love. May we keep your commandment to love one another just as you love us, and may that love flow out like a river to put out the fires of hatred in Sri Lanka, in Afghanistan, in Columbia, and wherever your children are in conflict with each other.

May we be faithful and true in all our relationships, with you, and with the earth that nourishes our bodies. May each of us make a difference, using the gifts that you have shared with us and the example and commandment of Jesus to love one another in the manner that he loved.

We bring to you, loving God, the prayers that are in our hearts for people who we know in this community, and in our family and friendship circles: people who are grieving the loss of someone, people who are grieving the loss of employment; people who are joyful; people who are traveling this weekend, and people who we know who need our prayers.

Spirit of life, we offer our lives and all that we are to serving you in love, as Jesus commanded. In Christ, you offer us friendship, a sacred gift that means serving you is our pleasure. Strengthen us God to love and serve others in your world. Amen.

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