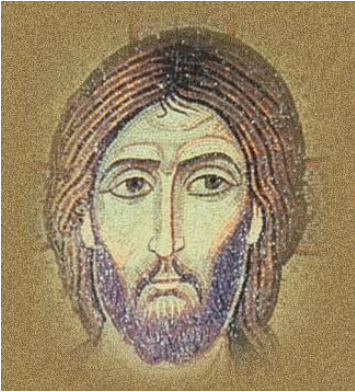


Hey, I Love You, Is That Okay?



Easy words to say but not always easy to live by. Can you remember the first time you said them ... to whom ... why ... how you lived up to them? In 1992, I was a theological student. For my internship, I spent a summer as a student chaplain at Vanier Correctional Institute, a women's prison in Brampton.

I thought I knew about love and its many requirements and expressions. But to that point in my life I had only scratched the surface. And I do not pretend to know all the questions or answers about love even yet. But I do know that loving God and loving my neighbour took on a new depth and height while I engaged with the women inmates at Vanier.

There, love was costly – that was my great learning. Some were easy to love; to enter into a loving, caring relationship with them seemed only natural. At first impression they were women just like you and me. They had similar interests and hobbies and loved to laugh. They seemed easy to love.

But there were many others, women who lived lives that were beyond my imagination, some with whom I would not choose a friendship or loving relationship. However, as I got to know them I learned that the thing most missing from their lives was love, real and deep unconditional love, the kind of love that accepts them, encourages them, lifts them up and gives them a sense that this world is a place where they too belong and where they can thrive.

Love does that – it gives us a sense of place and a place to belong. The absolute craving for love and acceptance is a basic human need. Without love, or without the feeling of being loved, as I learned from the women in Vanier Correctional Centre, life is diminished to shriveled proportions. We all need love and we will do whatever is necessary- negative or positive - to be or to feel loved. It is a basic need in human life.

Jesus seemed to know this, if we judge by his response to the question, “What is the summary of the law?”

You will likely know that in Jesus' day there were wandering religious teachers in Palestine. Jesus was one of them. You may also remember that it was the fashion of the day for the religious leaders of a town to meet these wandering teachers such as Jesus, at the gates of their town. There they would question the wandering leaders to see if they should gain entry, or even come and stay for a while.

One of their favorite questions was to ask the wandering teacher to offer their summary of the law and the prophets. Jesus, being soundly rooted in Jewish teachings and traditions, referred back to Deuteronomy and Leviticus to answer that the law is all about loving God and loving neighbour. The questioners could not have helped but be satisfied that Jesus passed the test for orthodox faith. What they did not know was that Jesus used the very law of love to challenge the religious practices of the same faith leaders because Jesus

was not content merely to say that love was the rule of God. He made it clear that love without behaviour and action was not love at all.

Rev. Jewitt Parr, a United Church minister and former Secretary of Stewardship Services for the United Church, once famously said that stewardship is what you do after you say, "I believe!" Easy words to say but can we live up to their meaning? This is absolutely a reflection of what it means to be a follower of Jesus. Today we are called to reflect about stewardship in relation to worship.

That is easy for me, because I believe that worship is our human response to the overflowing abundance of God's gifts to us. Moreover, worship is entirely counter-cultural. While the talk shows and advertisements on TV and in other media make it clear that I am most worthwhile when I am accumulating and spending, - Jesus' message reminds me that I am most alive when I am giving and forgiving.

In other words, worship is not primarily about receiving free grace as it is about freely giving gifts of time, talent and treasure for Jesus' sake and for Jesus' ministry. If we are truly the Body of Christ, then we are oriented toward God with an attitude of gratitude, remembering that the attitude has to translate into grateful giving if we want to be faithful followers of Jesus. This is basic Christianity 101.

What therefore is the centerpiece of worship? It is not the sermon, nor the praying, not even the singing – as important as all those elements of worship are. No, the still point of worship around which all else revolves is the offering because the offering is foremost a moment when followers of Jesus imitate their Saviour and companion. They give of themselves. They offer their hearts. They renew their commitment to give their time, their energy and imagination as they seek ways to serve Jesus who gave himself without reservation. It is after this pattern of self-giving love that we pattern ourselves as followers and imitators of Jesus. And nowhere in our worship is it more front and centre than in the offering of our gifts. "Love God and love your neighbour," said Jesus.

In her book Dakota: A Spiritual Geography, Kathleen Norris recounts her own spiritual journey when she returned from the big city to the small town of her grandparents and parents.

"Even as I exemplified the pain and anger of a feminist looking warily at a religion that has so often used a male savior to keep women in their place, I was drawn to the strong old women in the congregation. Their well-worn Bibles said to me, 'There is more here than you know,' and made me take more seriously the religion that had caused my grandmother's Bible to be so well used that its spine broke. I also began, slowly, to make sense of our gatherings on Sunday morning, recognizing, however dimly, that church is to be participated in . . . *The point is not what one gets out of it, but the worship of God; the service takes place both because of and despite the needs, strengths and frailties of the people present.* How else could it be?"

A story. Shirley was an inmate at Vanier. On the outside our paths would never have crossed – we live in different worlds here in Toronto. But Shirley had a need – to be liked ... to be loved. Vanier promote education in their Centre. They offer classes to they hope will help the women gain the tools to make a better life for themselves. Shirley wanted to attend a class. Religion in Life. If she did the work and wrote the 'exam' she would earn her own Bible, something she desperately wanted to own.

The problem was she had attended school up and to grade three. Reading was an effort and understanding the words she read was almost impossible. Once I learned of her interest and the difficulties involved for her I approached Shirley and offered to help her do her assignment.

She signed up for the course, received a Bible "on loan" and a quiz sheet to be filled in by her. It was a list of Bible quotes and verses and she was to fill in the blanks. Each question or quote told her where to look in the Bible for the answers. She didn't understand the assignment. I explained it to her and she went to her room

and tried to do the first few by herself. She could not do them. Reading words did not make sense to her. So I helped her.

What are the two most important commandments? See Exodus Chapter 20 verse 1

I read Shirley heard the answers. The day she was awarded her Bible was the proudest day of her life. Mine too!

Love God and love your neighbour! These are the two basic commands of the Gospel of Jesus found at the heart of our Sunday Worship. Our practices of love are summarized for us by what we do in loving sacrifice in Jesus' name. And that begins with our worship and carries through our week. May all who see us in action know we ARE Christians by our love. Let those who have ears hear and respond, Amen.

Rev. Dr. Ellen Redcliffe Matthew 22:34-46 October 26, 2008



**That all peoples
may know Him**