

Sunday October 29th, 2023
Proper29

Matthew 22:34-46
“Twisting in the Wind”

Like at most county or state fairs, there are always people trying to promote a product and/or service, and occasionally there are people trying to entertain with some sort of gimmick. I personally enjoyed Bandolini at the Norfolk Fair. One such presentation I heard about was the case at a local fair, where a carnival barker shouted out to people passing by to gather around for an amazing demonstration. When a sufficient crowd had gathered, a huge man, rippling with muscles, took the stage, and stood next to the emcee.

He proceeded to lift big barbells, and even lifted the back end of a tractor. The crowd clapped in appreciation. The emcee then took a large, juicy, orange from his hat, and handed it to the muscle-bound man, who proceeded to squeeze the orange, squishing out streams of orange juice. The man squeezed and squeezed, until there was nothing left but a mass of dried out pulp. Then the emcee said that he would give \$1,000 to any person who could come up on stage and squeeze out just one drop of orange juice from the pulp that was left.

An excited murmur went through the crowd, and soon several very strong farmers, both men and women, rushed to the stage to give it a try, but no one could squeeze anything out of the pulp. Finally, when all the people who wanted to try, had made the attempt, a very skinny, bi-speckled man asked if he could try. The crowd sized him up, and quickly chuckled at the thought. If all these very strong people could not get anything out of the pulp, what chance did this man have.

But fair is fair, and the emcee called him up to give it a try. The slightly built man clamoured onto the stage, and took the pulp and gave it a squeeze, and surprisingly, several drops of juice came dripping from his hand. The emcee and the crowd gasped in surprise. “But how?” stammered the emcee. “You must be amazingly strong for your size.” “Oh, not at all”, the man said, “I just happened to be an auditor for Revenue Canada”.

Today’s gospel reading, reminded me of an experience I had many years ago, while attending a joint youth group event, between my home church Queensway Baptist, and First Baptist Brantford. The leader of the event was from First Baptist, and was a student minister named Lloyd Hurlburt, and during the devotional time, he asked a question that provoked a lively debate among the youth present, and I have never forgotten the moment.

For some reason, we were discussing what being masculine really meant, and Lloyd suddenly asked us, “Was Jesus manly?” To be perfectly honest, none of us were quite sure how to answer the question. Lloyd pointed out that our hesitation to be definitive in stating Jesus was manly, was, he believed, the product of many years sitting in Sunday School and VBS’s, and hearing stories about Jesus that depicted him as meek and mild.

They are comforting images, but it also made Jesus seem soft and cuddly, at times even coming across as something of a doormat with the religious leaders stepping all over him. So, I wonder today what many of you think.

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How do you picture Jesus? I cannot prove it, but I suspect that one of the reasons so many men struggle in their spirituality, even if it is politically incorrect to say so, is that they perceive Jesus as soft. Even that famous portrait they still hang in some churches, has Jesus portrayed like an air-brushed super model, selling hair care products.

And so, one of the reasons I think these last few weeks, that we have journeyed through Matthew are important, is that the picture that emerges of Jesus is anything but soft. In 21:12 Jesus clears the temple. He also aggressively, and somewhat cryptically, defends his authority to teach and heal. Several times He uses parables/stories in a subversive way as a kind of ideological weapon against his opponents. I would describe it as like “poking the bear”.

Then when they challenge him with tricky questions regarding the law, taxation, and the resurrection, he turns the whole discussion around on them, leaving them speechless. If nothing else, the lesson here is that we need to be very cautious about picking and choosing stories about Jesus that depict him as being one dimensional. That, yes, Jesus was and is welcoming, friendly, forgiving, and provided nurture to hurting people, but he is also much more.

As we have seen over the last few weeks, Jesus has demonstrated that sometimes in this life, there are things worth getting worked up about, things worth arguing over, issues that do call us to be forthright, as well as being loving; especially when it comes to causes of justice and righteousness. I suspect that one of the reasons we hesitate to think of Jesus as assertive, and yes maybe at times a bit hard, is that we do not know how this meshes with our ideas about love.

We erroneously think that being people of love, or doing what Jesus would do, means grinning and bearing injustice, prejudice, and sin; because we think that is the loving thing to do. In other words, we suffer in silence, or we allow others to suffer in silence. The reality is therefore that we have a twisted sense of what it means to love God and love others, because right in the heart of all this confrontation, Jesus states that the most important thing is love.

Clearly, Jesus sees no contradiction between what he says, and what he does, and his call to love. So, it appears we really do not understand what love means, at least as Jesus talks about it and lives out. We all know that in our culture, we throw around the word love as a synonym for the word “like”. We say things like, “I really love chocolate”, and frankly who doesn’t? We love a boy friend or girl friend because they make us happy.

We love our spouses because they complete us. In all these things, there is a common element, emotion. This kind of love is a very passive thing. In these encounters we sit back and wait. Wait to see how we feel about a person, or even a thing. We either feel affection or we do not. That is why couples ridiculously talk about falling into and out of love. The love Jesus is espousing is not at all passive, and it is not strictly emotional.

In the bible there are many references to love, but Jesus is being specific. He is quoting Deuteronomy 6:5. The bible is clear, that God chose to love Israel above all other nations, and to express his love to them. It is an act of the will. To love God in Deuteronomy, is to choose to love God. Feelings are no part of the equation. We perhaps have heard about the Greek word *agape* that Jesus uses here.

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It is different from *philia*, or brotherly love; and *eros* which defines passionate or sexual desire. These later two are used very rarely in the New Testament, but *agape* is all over the place. Even though there might be some emotion connected to *agape*, it is not its defining nature. Another way to understand it is by calling it loving-kindness. It is active mercy. It is marked by generosity. It is a choice, not a feeling. This helps us understand today's text better, because if we think of loving God as an emotional thing, we will always come up short. I mean how can we conjure up feelings for someone so mysterious, and who at times seems remote.

This brings me to one of the things that concerns me most about Christian music, especially, but not exclusively, contemporary music. Quite a bit of it is intentionally crafted to elicit emotion for God and Jesus. In many cases, you could replace Jesus or God with your sweet-heart's name, and it would make grammatical and musical sense. Sometimes when I hear these songs it feels like I am trying to woo God or romanticise him.

And I understand how this transpires. There is a lot about God in Christ that is: beautiful, heart-warming, and touching. It is hard not to be moved emotionally by the powerful stories and even our worship and experience with God. And that is quite okay. What should concern us is this. Can we love God and our neighbour when we do not feel like it? When we must overcome our feelings, or simply ignore them, to act with mercy to someone else.

In this discussion, there needs to be some honesty or frankness. There are, as we all know, times when loving God, as Jesus calls us to, is very challenging. Maybe, dare we say it, almost impossible. Maybe in our brokenness, or when we are beaten down by life, we question God's goodness, and wonder why we should even bother to try to love him. But again, we almost always strive for feeling love, not *agape*. We think our love for God should just happen, as it should for our neighbours. That we can be passive about it.

True love of God, and of others, has an intentionality attached to it. For example, what parent has felt 100% of the time loving towards their child. Maybe you've heard this story before about two men sharing a coffee at the local coffee shop. One man proceeded to talk about how much grief his son was causing him. The young man was getting into so much trouble keeping his father up at night.

The other man replied. "Well, if he were my son, I'd have tossed him out of my home on his ear." To which the other man said, "Well if he were your son, I would toss him out too. But he is my son and I love him." That is intentional love. Love that is a product of the will. A love evidenced in an act of mercy. How many times have we known someone whose spouse or children are making their lives hellish, and we wonder, "How can they put up with that?" You already know the answer. *Agape*.

You see, when our actions are equal to everybody, whether they make us feel good or not, we are beginning to love both God and neighbour as Jesus intended. It is not at all easy, but it wasn't easy for God either. Israel time and time again, sinned and broke their covenant with God. Time and time again God forgave them and reconciled with them. God gave his all, as an act of love, namely Jesus. So, can we love those we find dirty and repugnant because the Pharisees couldn't.

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The challenge of Jesus' words, comes when we recognize that as Christ's followers we often use "love" as an excuse to the path of least resistance.

When confronted with the need to express mercy to someone, we think Jesus permits us to say, "I'm not feeling the love". Instead, Jesus is calling us to a love that leads us to excellence. Love as Jesus presented, and called us to, keeps us from being hypocritical. In James 2:15-16 we read, "If a brother or sister is naked and lacks daily food, and one of you says to them, 'Go in peace; keep warm and eat your fill,' and yet you do not supply their bodily needs, what is the good of that?"

The problem with our interactions with other people, begins with the fact that we often relate to others by considering what we need, or what they can do for us. This is so ingrained in us that when someone approaches us, we often respond by stating, "what do you want?" Our appreciation and interest in someone are often predicated on what they can do for us. Consider what Jesus said to the man who hosted him for dinner in Luke 14.

"When you give a luncheon or dinner, do not invite your friends or your brothers or your relatives or rich neighbours, in case they may invite you in return, and you would be repaid. But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind. And you will be blessed, because they cannot repay you, for you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous". (Luke 14:12-14)

How soon we forget that God created us, not because he needed us, but rather because he wanted us. He made you and I, and everyone else, for the love of it. Mike Mason points out that "strictly speaking, I do not know that I am needed in this world. It seems to me that the world could carry on quite well without me. Would it make any difference if there was one less star in the heavens? No, that extra star is not there because it is needed, but because it is wanted. (Practicing the Presence of People, p. 49)

Knowing I am wanted by God, and by other people, is more mysterious, and more freeing than feeling I am needed. It is far better, Jesus is telling us, to want God, and to want other people, rather than simply needing them. Can we want a person who is economically disadvantaged, or broken in spirit, and who cannot, in any way, give us anything that we need? Examine, therefore, Jesus' interactions with those that the Pharisees did not want.

Zacchaeus had nothing Jesus needed. In fact, reaching out to Zacchaeus was costly for Jesus. His reputation was going to take a terrible beating, but he did not care. Why? Because Jesus wanted Zacchaeus.

And because Jesus wanted Zacchaeus, Zacchaeus wanted other people. Remember how he said that if he defrauded anyone, he would pay them back, and would give away his money to the poor. Yes, Jesus had feelings for Zacchaeus, but that wasn't what motivated him. It would have been horrible for all of us if God's love was predicated on his feeling good towards us.

In the first epistle of John we read, "God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them." (1 John 4:16)

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I hear so often from people that they just do not understand God, and I get that there is an unfathomable mystery to God. The truth, however, is that if we wish to understand more about God, we must dwell in his presence, and if we want to dwell in God's presence then we need to be people of love.

In loving God and our neighbours, we know and are known. There is no other way to deepen our faith, and to experience an abundant life.