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St. Barnabas' Episcopal Church – Florissant, MO
Proper 18, September 6, 2020
Romans 13:8-14; Matthew 18:15-20

Today is my 40th wedding anniversary. Bill and I were married on September 6th, 1980 in Southern California on a beautiful sunny day overlooking the Pacific Ocean. We were in love and starry eyed and ready to begin our fairy tale together.

40 years later as I prayed with today's readings from Paul's Epistle and Matthew's Gospel about love in community, I thought about these many years of marriage and what they have taught me about love. Spoiler alert: It didn't turn out to be a fairy tale! But it turned out to be a roller coaster ride well worth the price of a ticket.

Here's what I have learned about love that I hear reflected in today's readings:

Love is not all about emotion. It is hard and beautiful work. I think about our coming together. Bill was from New York. I was from Los Angeles. You might say it was an Old World/New World marriage. His interpretation of "the Law," the way things should be done, and my interpretation were often different. In his world, there was a day for laundry and a day for meatballs and a day for rest. In my world you could put pineapple on a pizza and sometimes just let things go to head off on a new adventure. It took work, it still sometimes takes work even now, to move beyond the fulfilling of the law we each grew up with to understand that the point was to build a household of love and mutuality and joy. A place where all who entered could find rest. Paul is telling the Romans that the love of Christ is the point of the law. Just prior to this passage he is addressing what Christians owe to the civil authorities. He is addressing the letter of the law. But in our passage this morning he isn't talking about paying bills – he is talking about seeking the neighbor's highest good, the spirit of what the law is all about.

Our two interpretations of “law”, of how families function and how households should be run, were both ultimately pointed toward the same thing: love. 40 years ago, we began the hard work of moving beyond the letter of the law. Sometimes we had to scrap the meatballs on Thursdays because someone in the family had a different need. And sometimes we had to hold back on the adventuring because one of us needed a time of stability. My marriage has taught me that Christian love is not about emotion. It is about a commitment to the well-being of all, starting with our own households, into our communities and extending to all of God’s people. Paul tells us this morning that Christian love is not complacent, it is about *actively* seeking our neighbor’s highest good. That is the hard and beautiful work we are all called to in Christ.

My 40 years of marriage have also taught me that Love sometimes means speaking hard truths. So often we want to water Christian love down to “being nice.” But Matthew tells us that sometimes we have to let others know when they are hurting the family or the community. Love is not just about the individual; it is a community effort. Conflict between members not only affects the individuals involved but it affects the entire community. Christian love sometimes means a firm NO. You cannot continue to drink, gamble, work yourself sick or take your anger out on others. No, you can’t tell that racist joke at the Thanksgiving table. You can’t continue to gossip in the parking lot if you are not willing to speak your truth in love to the offender. Paul’s admonition in Ephesians to “speak the truth in love” tells us that true Christian love is willing to air differences, to bring hard things to light in the hope of reconciliation. This kind of love is not punitive, it’s not about being right or winning the argument. It’s about acting responsibly to bring about reconciliation and restoration.

In order to bring about the Kingdom of God we have to be willing to do the hard work of love and to ask the hard questions, to challenge anything that diminishes any one of us. That

won't always look or feel "nice." It may look like a peaceful protest or a family intervention. It may look like attending a town meeting to speak out against unjust policies or it may look like asking a family member to stay away until they can behave respectfully towards others. It may not feel "nice", but it is the courageous love we are called to in Christ. And it's the love that also allows the honor of any one of us to lead to rejoicing for all of us.

My 40 years of marriage has taught me that love doesn't have a balance sheet. I

went into marriage having heard that love requires "give and take." But what I learned over these years is that it doesn't always balance out. Love is not about keeping score. It's about giving our attention to the one or the ones who need it most at any given time. 10 years ago, I was in a life-threatening car accident. My pelvis was crushed and my left hip was broken in two pieces. I had massive blood clots in my lungs from the impact. I was in a wheelchair for months and required help with the most basic functions. My husband had to turn down a job opportunity to care for me, my kids gave up vacation time and hours at work to do their part, friends flew in to help for a week at a time. Having been the one who took care of everyone else, it was hard for me to accept such care. But it taught me about love in ways nothing else could have. I can't repay anyone for what they did for me. I can only live with the gratitude of having been so deeply loved back into wholeness. The love that Paul and Matthew and Jesus call us to is a love that doesn't count the cost. It's a love that asks, "Who is hurting?" "Who especially needs care at this moment?" Giving our attention to those who need it most doesn't take away from anyone else. Love doesn't carry a balance sheet. Love is not a zero-sum game. In God's economy love is a currency that does not run out. As it is spent it only grows.

So, knowing we won't always get it right, knowing that love is hard work that takes a courage we won't always be able to muster, knowing that speaking the truth in love won't

always win us friends, may we set out hearts on love anyway. May we love intentionally, extravagantly and unconditionally.

Come Holy Spirit, fill the hearts of your faithful and kindle in them the fire of your love.

Amen.