

Sermon: Rebecca Newland

31 January 2010 Epiphany Four

Jeremiah 1:4-10 Ps. 71:1-6 1Corinthians 13:1-13 Luke 4:21-30

Love is the Way

I have a hidden and dark secret. I read Georgette Heyer novels. In fact I read them over and over again. Heyer wrote over 70 novels including detective stories but she is best known for creating the Regency England genre of romance novels. Heyer made very well-researched historical fiction, full of all you could ever want: romance, fashion, upper classes, cross-dressing, arranged marriages, murder, intrigue, cant language, sarcasm and humour. I can quote you whole dialogues and some of her characters are like old friends that I enjoy catching up with time and again. However it does not matter how I dress it up or justify it her novels are about LOVE - romantic, heart aching love, overcoming all obstacles. I am a sucker for love.

Last week I preached about the nature of the Christian church and our very precious unity in diversity. I said that this week I would talk about how we nurture and protect that unity in diversity. How we make room for that necessary freedom and how we live into that new vision and how we continue Christ's mission. And quite simply the answer is love.

Now love is such an overused word and ideal in our culture that I am hesitant about bringing the topic up in a sermon – which is a little weird. In church we talk about or refer to the love of God a lot. In fact we mention it so much that I suspect it has begun to lose its meaning. Love, love – it is like confetti that we throw around hoping it will land somewhere and do some good. Which is not such a bad strategy but today I want to focus in on this one idea, I want to pick one little piece of confetti and explore it in a little more detail because as Paul writes it is the most excellent way. To be united and still make room for all our diversity and difference we need more than lofty ideas. To continue the mission of Christ in our daily lives we need more than faith, believe, knowledge, generosity, power and humility. We need love. In fact all those good and wonderful things without love mean nothing, zip, zero.

So what is it? You would have all heard that it is unconditional, that it is an action not a feeling. You would have heard that it is God's very nature, that the Trinity embodies it and that it is the reason for the death and resurrection of Jesus. You would have heard that we are empowered to love through the Spirit of Christ who

lives in us. This is what you have heard. Perhaps this is what you believe.

For this sermon I could quote you wonderful lines from wonderful theologians that would perhaps help us all understand what this love is all about. But I am not going to. Because this love I am talking about, this Christ-like, unconditional love, is the hardest thing we will ever attempt. Make no mistake it is the pinnacle of spiritual development and it is not easy

We read those words from 1 Corinthians at weddings all over the country (they were read at both my weddings!) and then we set the couple adrift to achieve one of the hardest things in life. We join a Church expecting that it will meet our needs for fellowship and acceptance and that it will be a place of love and then find WE can't stand some poor sod who has got on our wrong side or we find we don't really want to associate or be found to associate with those type of people – insert any type here. We find that for all our talk of diversity, true acceptance, true honouring of the other is elusive. We find that we can be impatient, dismissive and critical of others. We find we are more apt to blame with prejudice than we are to see Christ in our brothers and sisters. So today I want to acknowledge the difficulty. I want to take us to the heart of the pain and failure and highlight the way I believe God opens before us – and given I only have 10 minutes I am just going to skim the surface and my suggestions may seem simplistic.

So why is this love so difficult?

Well it is because we are like two different people contained in the one person. In very simplistic terms we have a 'bad' self and a 'good' self. However, I find those categories quite unhelpful and misleading. Another way to put it is that we have an old self and new self or as Paul writes in Romans we have an old Adam and a new Adam. The old part is that primal part of ourselves that is still fear driven. This self is concerned with survival and maximising any situation for maximum benefit. This self wants to be secure, safe, accepted and liked. On some level this self wants to be the centre of attention and wants things all it's own way. This self aligns itself with powerful people and shuns powerless ones. This self has a shipping container full of negative memories that influence its reactions to other people. There is nothing innately evil about this self – it is simply doing its best to survive and use whatever tools it can find to get on in the world.

The other part of us is what we could call the higher self, or the Christ like self. This self can discern the good, the true and the beautiful and work towards those things. This self is more concerned for the highest good, and for the well being others than it is for itself. This self is the part where divine love emerges from the depths of our being and finds expression. This love is always in response to the other, a self-giving with

no thought of return.

Love is actually the very structure of our being. If the previous self is fear driven, this self is love motivated. The previous self in fact operates out of misdirected love of self. The desire to be loved, to possess love for one's self is too strong and the will to give to others is too weak. This is misdirected self love is not the healthy self-love must have that honours our own being as one with creation and made in the image of God. This misdirected love is self-love out of balance and fear driven. The old word for it is sin.

If we look at Romans again Paul describes the state of tension between these two parts as a wretched place. He says, *"I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate. For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do"*. I don't know about you but when I first became fully aware of those words they resonated so powerfully with me I thought Paul was talking about me. I thought, here was someone who really got what our internal world can be like at times. Anyone who has tried to love unconditionally, those who are married, in partnerships and who have failed, know the wretchedness of which Paul speaks. Anyone who has tried to curb their temper, mind their tongue while they interact with Joe Blogs in pew number one (who somehow reminds us of Aunt Dot –the nightmare relation of our childhood) knows the internal pain that Paul describes.

In our Corinthians readings Paul talks about the fact that we have a childish nature and an adult nature. In the nicest possible way he tells his readers to grow up. All those difficulties we face all that tension and pain, all that self-consciousness and fear – put it aside, grow up and leave behind that self-centred, childish, way of being. Grow up and let go of your fear, your resentments, your need to have things the way you want them. Grow up and stop needing to be right, justified, safe and comfortable. When we become adults we are supposed to put an end to childish ways.

The reality is of course that both selves exist within each one of us to varying degrees but our path is the way of love. Now here is the catch. We have to choose this way. We have to consciously choose to act with love rather than choose to be overwhelmed by fear. The fact that Paul can articulate the conflict in his being, and that we can identify with that, means that we have the capacity of awareness and choice. There is a great line in the movie the Kingdom of Heaven, it is about the only good line too and I can't even remember who said it, but it is this, *"Mohammed said submit. Jesus said choose"*.

I don't want to get into whether one is better than the other but I do want to highlight that as followers of

Jesus we must consciously, intentionally choose love. If we rely on instinct or what we had for breakfast or the fact that we have given up chocolate and coffee for lent or the parenting we received 60 years ago we are probably not reaching the level that our highest self is capable of. If we are not choosing love I suspect we are missing the essence of love for it is ultimately based in freedom - our freedom and the freedom of the other.

Our freedom to rise above that part of us that would keep us cocooned in a safe, comfortable world and the freedom of the other to be who they are called to be, no matter how confronting, irritating and that may seem to us. True unity in diversity exists when we can be with another human being and leave them free to be exactly who and what they are. We don't have to change them, convert them, convince them, cure them or challenge them – but – if we do leave them free transformation becomes possible for both them and us. If we are acting from love and not fear then something miraculous this way comes. Now if all of us are acting in love in this free and liberating way you can perhaps imagine what heaven would begin to look and feel like. I suspect we have little foretastes of it in this place but I, like Paul, would still say to all of us - grow up, become an adult and put an end to childish ways.

There is one more important thing to say about love. Our capacity to choose love and to love as Paul outlines is directly related to the state of our relationship with God. In a Christian community or a Christian marriage or relationship what comes first is the love of God - God's love for us and our love for God. All love is holy and it is always a reflection of the love of God.

The great commandment – you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength and you shall love your neighbour as yourself - is in two parts. The first part is loving a loving God. Our relationship with God is like any relationship - it requires regular quality time. And here is a quote from a theologian, John Westerhoff, *“Agape, universal, underserved love for all, is learned through development of a friendship with God founded on a shared love of the good, the true, and the beautiful”*.

It is difficult to develop an intimate friendship with someone unless we spend a significant amount of quality time with that person. Would we develop much of a friendship with someone if we spent only one hour a week or what amounts to four days a year with her or him? So find the time to be real before God – you know a real person with fear, doubt, emotions and pain. Find the time to immerse yourself in God's presence. And don't do all the talking. Take time –lots of time to listen. God speaks to us through our heart,

through interior emotions, dreams, visions, intuitions and the like. Our union with God is a thing of the heart and when we make our relationship to God the first and most important thing in our lives then the flow on effects in our relationships, our work and our Christian communities is real and profound. Love stands a chance and we find that we can choose, bit by bit, moment by moment to love one and all – just as God in Christ loves us.

Let us pray....