

## **All you need is...**

Sunday, 19 April, 2015, ds. Don Mader

Scripture lessons: Mark 12:28-34; I Corinthians 13

John Lennon is supposed to have said that when he was a little boy his mother always told him that happiness was the key to life. Once he started in school, he was asked what he wanted to be when he grew up. He answered, 'happy'. The teacher told him he didn't understand the assignment. He told the teacher she didn't understand life. It was his first lesson in how to get yourself classified as a social misfit, in one easy step.

The Beatles – and John Lennon in particular – were good for generalizations like that about the meaning of life. Take, for example, the text to which our sermon title refers: “All you need is love”. It – and, well, the whole album on which it appeared – is one of the iconic moments of its era. I remember to this day precisely where I was and who I was with when I first heard it: a room on the second floor of the Akers Hall dormitory on the East Campus of Michigan State University, with Jim Ebert and his roommate Jeff Snoyer. I was working with them as editors of a hippy underground newspaper, and we had received a copy of the Magical Mystery Tour album for favour of review, and listened to it on Jim's stereo. And yes, it was a mind-blowing experience: the song, the whole album. It was not for nothing that many of us jokingly referred to ourselves as “Marxist-Lennonists (tendency Groucho and John)”.

You know the words perfectly well:

Love, love, love

Love, love, love

Love, love, love

There's nothing you can do that can't be done

Nothing you can sing that can't be sung

Nothing you can say but you can learn how to play the game

It's easy

There's nothing you can make that can't be made

No one you can save that can't be saved

Nothing you can do but you can learn to be you in time

It's easy

All you need is love

All you need is love

[all together now:]

All you need is love, love

Love is all you need is love

Now, you might think, in light of what St. Paul has to say about love in the equally iconic thirteenth chapter of his first letter to the Corinthians – “I may speak in the tongues of men or angels, but if I am without love I am but a sounding gong or clanging cymbal. I may have the gift of prophecy, and know every hidden truth, I may have faith strong enough to move mountains, but if I have not love, I am nothing. I may dole out every thing I possess, or even give my body to be burnt, but if I have not love, it avail nothing. Love will never come to an end. Are there prophets? Their work will be over. Are there tongues of ecstasy?

They will cease. Is there knowledge? It will vanish away. In a word, there are three things that last for ever: faith, hope, and love. But the greatest of them all is love” – and even more, in light of Jesus' affirmation of the summary of the Law in the double commandment of loving God and loving your fellow man, you might really think that is true: all you need is love. It's a hat trick: Jesus, Paul and John Lennon.

There was a time when I agreed. Looking back, I find that the first sermon I ever preached – about seven minutes long, at a church youth group service back when I was fourteen – I took the whole of the 13<sup>th</sup> chapter of I Corinthians as my text, and urged Christian love as the solution to all the world's problems. But, as St. Paul also writes, “When I was a child, my speech and my thoughts were those of a child... when I grew up, I finished with childish things.” I'm here today to tell you it ain't so: love is NOT all you need.

It's not just that all generalizations like that about life, no matter how good they sound the moment you hear them, all break down. Happiness is the key to life? Well, depending on how you define happiness, yes, no, and maybe. All you need is love? Well, I can think off hand of several things which don't involve love which would go a long way in making the world go around a bit more smoothly – like tolerance, for instance. Tolerance does not imply that you love your adversary: in fact, it implies serious disagreements. But, even if it is only in your self-interest that you are giving your opponent the same tolerance you ask for yourself and your opinions, you accept your opponent's right to think or say what he or she thinks, or be who they are. (While on the subject of attributed quotes, there is that famous line attributed to Voltaire, ‘I disapprove of what you say, but I will defend to the death your right to say it.’)

And what do we mean by love, anyway? The Greeks famously had three words for love – philea, eros and agape. Philea is “brotherly love” – Philadelphia, the Quaker city of brotherly love – the love owed to your community and fellow citizens, implying a certain sense of duty, and translated in the Bible as “friendship” (James 4:4). Then there is eros, or longing, passion, often with a sense of mutual satisfaction, as in “When a man loves a woman” (or for that matter, another man...) – whence its 'bad' name among Christian moralists, although its presence in marriage, or in pedagogical eros, or, later, in Dante's 'courtly love', indicates that it is far from deserving that condemnation; the word is not used in the New Testament. And then there is 'agape' - “Christian” or “selfless” love, without passion or any thought of self-interest.

In English we have to make do with one word that covers a lot of ground. I love chocolate, I love my cat, I love my neighbour. I eat the one, but not the other two.

And then, there is the problem of just how one 'loves' a person that one does not know – or to put it another way, of love at a distance. It is quite possible for me to love my neighbour – or even my enemy, both of whom I know? But how is it possible for me to 'love' a person in, say, a battle zone in Syria, or an African refugee? Maybe the answer is found in the Greek philea: I 'love' them out of a sense of duty, as fellow world citizens. But that has to run through institutions, political or economic, and that in turn is complicated by the problem posed in Reinhold Niebuhr's *Moral Man and Immoral Society*: as responsibility becomes diluted, so does our ethical response. Individuals may well act morally, but a collective of the same individuals, like a parliament or corporation, does not – and cannot. There self-interest prevails.

Perhaps the most useful definition I have found for love is 'seeking the best for the Other'. That avoids all of the theoretical problems, all of the issues of selfishness or unselfishness; it can be in any kind of relationship; it can be at any distance. It defines love as an action,

not an emotion or feeling. It focuses on intentions and actions toward the object of one's love, be it a spouse or a child or a neighbour or an enemy or an unknown person half-way around the world – but at the same moment rebukes the treatment of that person as a mere object, for it is in their best interest that they are always regarded as a subject. And if, as Christians, we want an example, we have it in the love of God.

One aspect is in creation and providence: just as God provides for his creatures, in our relationships we seek to meet the wants and needs of those we love, whoever and wherever they are. There is a certain aspect of the paternal, of paternalism, if you will, in this: it is not without reason that we reflect on God as “our Father in heaven”, for this relation takes in aspects of care for a dependent other, but also of pedagogy and their guidance, to bringing them to a maturity as independent persons. It will thus necessarily also involve setting bounds for them – which they may or may not like, may or not follow, and which we may or may not be able to enforce. In modern parlance, that is called 'tough love', forcing a thoughtless or rebellious teenager or an addicted spouse to face the consequences of their acts. It involves judgement, holding the other person responsible for their own actions. God practices 'tough love', in the ethical laws built into the human creation: we tear apart the fabric which connects us to others only at our own risk in the end. Such 'tough love' can be – and usually is – painful for the loved one, but it can also be painful for us to have to enforce 'tough love' on another we love, to see them hurt, to not be able to cushion them from the result of their acts. Again, it is not for nothing that Hosea 11 pictures God as a parent facing the dilemma of how to deal with a rebellious adolescent son.

That in turn leads to another and even more important aspect – that of love as forgiveness and reconciliation. That too can be painful and risky. It can be painful for both sides. There is the pain involved in forgiving, in accepting for yourself the pain of the wrong done to you, rather than getting even and taking it out on the other, feeding the spiral of tit-for-tat revenge – 'staying hit', in the parlance of the street in New York in the 1970s and '80s – that pain for God which is such a necessary part of the reconciliation on the Cross (and without all kinds of substitutional atonement theories to explain it, but simply as a part of a any relationship). God suffered in forgiving us the wrong we did to him; we suffer when we forgive others the wrongs they have done to us.

This comparison between divine and human love is not, of course, without its problems. Seeking to do what is best for another person requires that we know what that 'best' is, or will be. Now, for God, that is easy: it's a part of the job description, to be all-knowing. For us, it is a rather different matter. As Soren Kierkegaard succinctly put it, “Life can only be understood backwards; but it must be lived forwards.” Which is to say, meaning and the discernment of patterns comes only in retrospect, but we have to make our choices and decisions now, based on a future we cannot know. Even if we know a person as well as a parent knows their child, we cannot know the circumstances under which that person will live in the future; indeed, as rapidly as our society is changing, we can perhaps hardly imagine them. We are too limited to know for sure what is the best for another – or at least, we can't always know it, although we can sometimes make some pretty good guesses based on our knowledge of them and our understanding of the past. Our best intentions may prove wrong – and that will not absolve us of our responsibility if they do. Then it is time for asking forgiveness for ourselves, and the pain that brings.

There is also the pain of having to give things up. At a personal level it can be your own independence, when you enter a marriage or other relationship, or undertake parenting. At the other, social and economic end of the spectrum, love will involve sharing out your resources, and foregoing benefits so that others may have a better life.

Brothers and sisters, love is NOT all you need. At the very least, in all instances, you also need a very large dose of sound understanding, of critical judgement. You need perseverance and daring. In loving at a distance you need a devotion to justice, social and economic justice, as the only way to really 'love' those who you do not know as individuals. What you certainly do not need is 'love' as a sloppy, emotional, 'no strings attached' feeling, which involves no commitment, no risk and no pain, which I'm afraid was all too much what we had in mind in the 'Summer of Love'. Only if love includes all those things, only when the love we share is modelled on the love God has shared with us can we truly join the chorus (all together now!) "All you need is love, love, love is all you need is love!"