

Homily – Love, Love, Love**Rob Keim****October 31, 2021 – St. Barnabas' Episcopal Church**

Earlier this year, while on Sabbatical I read twenty-six books. And one of the books was about the world's greatest novelists or writers. There were eighty-five chapters, each about a different novelist, and I read a chapter a day to learn about these greatest writers who ever lived. The problem was that the list only included a handful of women and almost all of the writers were from Europe or America. It was not a very inclusive list. To remedy this I am currently reading a chapter a day from a book called "Great Literature of the Eastern World." This book includes 111 writers or books from China, India, Japan, Korea, and the Middle East. The oldest of these books from the East is from 1500 BC or five hundred years before King David of Israel. Many of the books are from 500 BC, around the time that Isaiah, Ezekiel, and Jeremiah were writing the prophetic books of our Old Testament. For me, it has been eye opening to read about ancient daily life for so much of it is quite similar to the things we wrestle with today. Many of the ancient books are about how to live a good life, and many of the themes are ones that we find in the Bible.

Now, you may remember that we don't know much about Jesus from the time he was a baby to when he starts his earthly ministry around the age of thirty. Some novelists fill in the information gap about his early years with speculation that Jesus traveled to the Far East while he was in his twenties. We have no clue if this is true or false, but it is an interesting speculation since there are a lot of similarities between the ancient writings of India and China and the teachings of Jesus. One central theme that they share is that as human beings we are to grow into our capacity to love. God created us to live into our true self, a way of being that is filled with beauty and love.

Love is the theme of many of Jesus' teachings, and it is what we hear from Jesus in his Great Commandment. In this morning's Gospel reading we heard Jesus says "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.' The second is this, 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' There is no other commandment greater than these."

God and love. Love and God. It is this linking of God and love that have become a central part of my personal theology. I would go so far as to say that God is love. So this morning, I want to focus on love, and, to do that here is a Christian framework of love that is helpful to me, and I hope it is for you as well.

First, God loves. That is the first part of this helpful framework. God loves.

Second, we respond to God's love in one of those three-legged stools. As Episcopalians, we like to explain things in threes and this construct is a three-legged stool of love. We are to love God, we are to love others and we are to love ourselves. We have all heard people say that you can't really love God if you do not also love your neighbor. I think this is true. I think our ability to love other people directly impacts our ability to love God. Loving God and loving others are related.

But, there aren't just two legs. We also need to love ourselves. I don't think you can effectively love God or love others if you don't also love yourself. A lot of people dismiss the idea of loving self because they think it ignores God's love for us. They think the self-esteem movement has gone too far such that self-esteem means over reliance on self and elimination of God. There are times that this happens, but this does not mean we throw the baby out with the bath water. Self-esteem is still important. We need to allow ourselves to be the beloved of God. God loves us so we should also love ourselves. Much of the ineffectiveness we have in loving God and loving others is because we don't also love ourselves.

Fifteen hundred years ago, Augustine wrote about love. And, he assumed that all people love themselves. As a gay man, my experience has been quite different. When you are taught that being gay is sub-human, it is hard to love yourself. For years the message from society and even from the church has been damaging to so many.

Women are worth less than men. Damaging to self.
 LGBT are worth less than straight folks. Damaging to self.
 One race is worth less than another. Damaging to self.
 Poor folks are worth less than rich folks.
 Introverts are worth less than extraverts.
 Only beautiful, funny, articulate, normal people are worth anything.

Over and over we have messages that are damaging to self. As Christians and as a Church, we need to encourage people to respond to God's love in three ways, not just one or two. Many of us here today come from a variety of other Christian traditions, and we all know of churches that emphasize only one of these responses to the love of God. Sometimes, a church focuses only on loving God. Sometimes, a church ignores love of God and only focusing on loving others. As Christians and as a Church we need to focus on all three. We need to love God back, we need to love others because God loves them, and we need to love ourselves because we are the beloved of God.

Now, I have a caveat about love. I have completed about ninety chapters in the Book of Literature of the East, and many of the ancient stories from the East have arranged marriages. In the 1990s when I was in business school one of my classmates went

home to India for the summer where his family had setup an arranged marriage. Here in the west we commonly love a person before we marry them, but in many cultures throughout the centuries the marriage begins before love grows. I am intrigued by this process where we grow to love a person. It certainly fits in with my life experience that shows love is not static. It changes over the decades. I think we all know that love is not like the Hallmark cards. It is not like the storybook romance where they just “lived happily ever after.” Love is not just a warm and fuzzy feeling that two people have between them. It is a commitment, and can even be a sacrifice in which a person gets outside of themselves and their own needs and desires. It is a letting go of the ego for the benefit of another. In my own life, being a single parent took a lot of love. People used to ask me if being a single parent was hard, but to me the questions didn’t make much sense. There was no evaluation of was it hard or easy. You just did what you needed to do. There was juggling. Sometimes I didn’t get to do what I wanted. For me it seems like love doesn’t evaluate. Love just does what needs to be done. And I’m guessing that many of you have had this experience as well. I see it in my daughter and her husband as they share this same type of selfless love with their two-year old son. And, to unpack this type of love further, I want to share two stories. The first is the reading we heard earlier from the beginning of the Book of Ruth. In this story Ruth pledges to remain with her mother-in-law so that they will both struggle together. This is an ancient story of love and commitments. The second story that I want to share is from one of the books I read about in the Eastern canon. This is not one of the ancient books for it was written in Japan in 1972. Here is a summary of “The Twilight Years” by Ariyoshi Sawako.

The story is about Akiko, a married woman in a suburb of Tokyo who is forced to juggle her day job and the care of her father-in-law, Shigezo. Throughout the years, Shigezo has been cruel and verbally abusive to his daughter-in-law, but as he grows senile, Akiko is one of the few people he still recognizes, and she is forced into the role of caretaker. Her husband is of little help. She must bathe Shigezo and help him in the bathroom. She must comfort him when he acts like a frightened child, and find him when he wanders out of the house. Akiko is exhausted, frustrated and sometimes angry with her husband and father-in-law, however when Shigezo comes down with pneumonia, Akiko gives up her job to care for him full time. Shigezo recovers but has a remarkable change in demeanor. His illness seems to have brought him a kind of spiritual calm, acceptance, and happiness, and Akiko finds herself settling into her new life. “The Twilight Years” is a novel of development in which the protagonist assumes the unpleasant, frustrating, and exhausting responsibility of caring for a senile elderly man whom she has never liked, and in the process, achieves a sense of communion, love, and spiritual fulfillment in their relationship. Had Shigezo been placed in a nursing home, Akiko’s personal development would never have occurred.

This is a story that should resonated with many of you, because you have lived it. Or, if you haven't lived it yet, you may be blessed to live it in the future. This is a story of real love, not the storybook kind. I am convinced that as Akiko was able to grow in her love for her father-in-law, then she also grew in her love for herself and in her love for God. This is who Jesus wants us to be when he gives us the Great Commandment. Selfless love is not limited to parents and children, and it is not limited to the beginning of life or the end of life. It comes throughout our lifetime. And, sometimes we are the giver of that love and sometimes we are the receiver. Love God, love others, and love yourself. God created you for love.