

May 17, 2009

Loving is like A Stream

John 15:9-17

Fourteen years ago, Sun and I had the opportunity to visit the Holy Land. On our way home from Israel, I brought two bottles of wine and two bottles of water to use for holy sacraments during worship. The wine was made in the town of Cana in Galilee, where the Lord Jesus made wine out of water at a wedding ceremony. I mixed the wine with grape juice and used it at Holy Communion. As for the bottled water that I brought, I used it for baptismal services on Easter Sunday.

Some of my fellow travelers, who were also ministers, brought home bottles of water from the Jordan River. But I felt that water from the Jordan was not clean enough for use in baptism. You see, the Jordan River flows between the Sea of Galilee and the Dead Sea. The water in the Sea of Galilee comes from Mount Hermon. A stream from the top of Mount Hermon flows through the valleys into the Sea of Galilee. The water then runs through the River Jordan, and eventually ends up in the desert of the Dead Sea. Instead of water from the Jordan, I brought home water from the source instead – from the top of Mount Hermon.

The Galilee is a big lake, double the size of Lake Granby in Colorado, and it is full of many kinds of fish. The water from the Galilee ends up in the Dead Sea. The Dead Sea is also a big lake, four times bigger than the Galilee. But there are no fish in the Dead Sea. There are no living creatures at all. Sun and I had a swim in the Dead Sea. The water was so salty that I could lie down on top of the water and read a newspaper.

There is a Korean proverb that says, “Love flows down.” It means that loving is like a stream that flows down, and not up. Sun visited my daughter Alice when she delivered her baby Benjamin. Sun felt sorry for Alice, who looked so tired after her Caesarean section. After watching Alice trying to nurse Benjamin for an hour, Sun suggested to her, “Why don’t you eat supper first and then nurse Benjamin?” But Alice was not happy to hear her mom say that, and replied, “But Mom, don’t you feel sorry for the baby?”

Sun loves her daughter Alice. And Alice loves her son Benjamin. That is love flowing from the top to the bottom. Parents love their children, and children love their own children, and so forth. That is love that continues to flow down to the next level. Loving is a flowing stream. If love cannot flow to the next level, and stops flowing, that love, like water, can become polluted. It becomes an egoistic self-love.

The scripture reading, John 15:9-17, shows us that love indeed flows down, from God originally to Jesus our Lord, and then through His crucifixion, to us. And this love doesn’t end with us. God’s commandment is that we must let the love flow through us, like a stream, to reach others.

This scripture lays out for us three principles of Christ's love. First, there is joy in true love. When someone finds the love of his or her life, they are changed by the joy of love. Their eyes are changed, their hearts are changed, their faces are changed, and consequently, their lives are changed.

During one church's Easter Pageant, there was an interesting scene when Pilate learns about Jesus's empty tomb.

A Roman soldier says to Pilate: "Sir, the tomb of Jesus, the king of the Jews, was found empty. We found a lady named Magdalene near the tomb before dawn. She must have been his crazy lover. She was also seen by the cross."

Then Pilate orders him: "What? Capture that woman and question her. There must be a conspiracy behind the empty tomb."

But the wife of Pilate says: "What a happy woman she is! I wish I had a lover that I could love with all my heart."

In truth, those who love are happier than those who are loved. The most joyous life is to find and love someone with all one's heart. When we love someone, life is worth living. There is energy to live in love. There is hope to live in love. There is vision to see life in love. There is joy to celebrate life in love. There is significance to relate in love. Jesus explained, "I have told you this so that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete. My command is this: Love each other as I have loved you." (John 15:11-12) Those who have someone to love are the richest people in the world.

The second principle is: There is labor in true love. Love is not lip service. Love is the work of labor.

Without the labor of love, there is no life in love. There are three virtues in Christian life: Faith, Hope and Love. Each of these virtues requires effort. In 1 Thessalonians 1:3, Saint Paul refers to the "work of faith, labor of love and steadfastness of hope."

Everything that is worth something requires labor. A young mother exclaimed, "No labor of love, no joy of love!" as she held her newborn baby in her arms. Every living creature needs the labor of love to thrive. If you love your dog, your actions will show your love – feeding him food, giving him baths, going on walks, and picking up after his messes. Without the labor of love, the love is vague, and nothing but lip service.

I have seen on Fridays the devoted couples among our church members, who lovingly clean and vacuum the sanctuary, the fellowship hall, the bathrooms, hallway and stairs. They love the house of the Father. They love their church by their hearts and labors, both visibly and invisibly.

Thirdly, there is fruit in true love. The Bible tells us that love bears fruit.

Pretty soon, our President will appoint a new Supreme Court Justice. The nominee will be honored. For a lawyer, to be named a Supreme Court Justice is the ultimate fruit of their career. The Lord said, “You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you to go and bear fruit – the fruit that will last.” (John 15:17) Do you know that you are chosen by God? It is a privilege to be chosen. Be proud that you were chosen.

The Bible tells us that there will be fruits among the chosen people. “But now listen, O Jacob, my servant, Israel, whom I have chosen. This is what the Lord says – he who made you, who formed you in the womb, and who will help you: Do not be afraid, O Jacob, my servant, Jerusalem, whom I have chosen. For I will pour water on the thirsty land, and streams on the dry ground; I will pour out my Spirit on your offspring, and my blessing on your descendants. They will spring up like grass in a meadow, like poplar trees by flowing streams.” (Isaiah 44:1-4)

The Great commandment from the Lord is: Love your God with all your heart. And love your neighbor as yourself. How can we love both God and our neighbor?

To worship God is to love God. Don’t miss your opportunity to love God. Through worship, we can God and please God by our actions.

A man was marooned on a deserted island. This man prayed every day for God to rescue him, and each day passed with no help coming to save him. No one knew he was there. Discouraged, he eventually built a little hut to protect himself and his few possessions.

But then one day, the man went out searching for food. When he returned, he found his little hut in flames. The worst had happened. Everything was lost. He was heartsick. “God, how could you do this to me?” he cried.

The next morning, the man was awakened by the sound of a ship. It had come to rescue him. “How did you find me? How did you know I was here?” the man asked his rescuers. They said, “We saw your smoke signal!” Worship is our smoke signal to God.

It is easy to get discouraged when things are going bad, but God is always at work in our lives. Even in the midst of our pain and suffering and disappointment, and even at the place of death, we can trust God to catch us. The Lord promised that when two or three get together in His name He will be with us. Worship is gathering in His name to express our love and trust to God.

We need to develop good habits to lead a blessed life. For example, going to church is a habit, and not going to church is also a habit. Praying is a habit, and not praying is a habit. Praying regularly, studying the scriptures, attending worship, participating in the life of the church – these good habits bring us victory, fruits, success and blessed life.

To serve others is to love others. Ministry means serving people. For Christians, we need to practice two kinds of love – one is exclusive love and the other is universal love.

First, we need to practice exclusive love for God through worship. Second, we need to practice universal love of others through service. We are called and chosen to exercise these two loves. That is Jesus's Great Commandment.

Many years before Christ, the law of the land was revenge. "If you do something bad to me, you better watch out, because I'll do something even worse to you!" Revenge was the accepted law of the land.

When Moses came, he took the people a big step forward. Instead of revenge, the law became retribution, or getting even. Rather than responding to a wrong with a bigger wrong, Moses said that you could only do the same harm back. An eye for an eye. A tooth for a tooth.

But then came Jesus! And he introduced a new Commandment, a new way, a new approach, a radically new response, – the law of love! He told us that you don't have to strike back! You don't have to get even! You can forgive! You can love! If you want to know what is special about the teaching of Jesus, this is it: the new Commandment to love one another. Not revenge, not retribution, but love! Love is the way! Love is the answer!

This is the way to live greatly in the world. It may seem impossible to us. But there is power and strength behind us, through him who strengthens us. Saint Paul said, "I can do everything through him who strengthens me." Let the love of Christ flow through you to the world.

Love flows down. Loving is like a stream constantly flowing.