

BEYOND THE COMFORT ZONE

A sermon preached by the Rev. Dr. Nadene Grieve-Deslippe on May 2, 2010
Crossroads United Church

Acts 11: 1-18

John 13:31-35

Shirley Maclaine, the actress, was raised a Presbyterian and slowly embraced Buddhism over time. She has taken her spiritual journey much further, such that some give little or no credence to anything that she expounds. When she was asked early in her journey why she had moved away from Christianity to an eastern religion she responded, "Because not harming my neighbour makes more sense to me than loving them." While you will not find books by Shirley Maclaine in my office library, her succinct response to that particular question has long stayed with me. Not harming my neighbour makes more sense than loving my neighbour.

Not harming a neighbour may make more sense to many of us, and might even be deduced as being easier to do than loving. However, if we were honest, when push comes to proverbial shove we might all need to confess that we have also harmed because it is very challenging to love as Christ loved. It is a tall order and as we ponder the commandment in light of the companion text we can see demonstrated just how challenging the commandment is to integrate into the life of faith. And yet it is the quality of our loving that sets us apart; by this you shall be known.

To love as Christ has never come as second nature or with ease to those who follow in the footsteps of the carpenter from Galilee. As Christianity spread in its first fledgling days even Peter and other early Jewish converts found it challenging to reconcile the Jewish roots of tradition with the new way expounded by Jesus. The story from Acts has Peter defending his actions to the Jerusalem community, which was largely Jewish, of embracing Gentile converts. Mired as they were in tradition and the status quo of "But we have always done it this way" this community saw the Christian community as exclusive. It was a sect of Judaism.

Peter explains that extending the kingdom to those outside of Judaism was God's doing. Belief in Jesus and the outpouring of God's spirit are the gifts of God. Apostles do not control the ebb and flow of God's grace, which, is extended to Jew first and then Gentile. In rhetoric that awes and silences Peter says, "If God gave Gentiles the same gift that God gave to us when we came to believe in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I to hinder God?" Down through the eons the question still haunts and engages and calls us out of the comfort zone of complacency and familiarity, "Who are we to hinder God?"

Into our hands has been entrusted the message, vision and mission of the carpenter from Galilee. As his disciples we have been commanded to love as he modeled love. What does that mean? It means with arms outstretched to draw in those that others would shun. It means touching those that are infected with disease. It means seeing the enormity of the offering when it is just a few pennies. It means seeing the potential in the modern day equivalent of a fisherman. It means moving beyond the comfort zone of rules and regulations and living in the gray area of possibility. Like him we are to say in love, "You have heard it said, but I say."

To love as Jesus modeled means to not be bound or limited by convention. And this continues to gnaw and niggle in our day and generation as much as it did in the Jerusalem community. To love as Jesus means to put each attitude and behaviour under the microscope and ponder the relevance of his question, "Which one loved more priest, and Levite who walked by the victim in the street pretending not to see or the Samaritan who stopped and rendered first aid? You go and do the same." To love as Jesus loves means that we do not see death as a final curtain. We may not have the experience of Jairus whose daughter was raised from death, but those who have lost a loved one know that love is eternal and death cannot separate us from deep and abiding love that is not rendered impotent by death.

To love as Jesus taught and modeled means to stand in anticipation and be prepared for the return of the prodigal. And when the prodigal returns we do not add

insult to injury nor demean with judgments like “I told you so. Or what have you to say for yourself?” No we clothe them in the finest apparel and put a ring on the finger and restore them to their rightful place. To love as Jesus loved calls us to sometimes see the needs of the one missing sheep as paramount and leave the majority and seek out the lost and wandering one. To love as Jesus loved means to forgive those who have hurt us. While we often attach more figurative parameters to our wounds, Jesus said from the instrument of torture upon which he had been impaled, “Forgive them who simply do not understand.” The new commandment of Jesus as recorded in the gospel of John is indeed a tall order, and yet, it is by this criterion that we shall be set apart and known.

My life this week has been punctuated by grace that came wearing the face of pain. I had a conversation with a young parent and partner who is experiencing challenges within the marriage and is at a crossroads of decision. Another conversation included the news that one that I had long known was trans gendered and would begin living the life of the opposite sex. I stood in solidarity and hope tinged with fear and foreboding around the hospital bed of one who had suffered a sudden heart attack. I sat at council table and was reminded again of increases to budgets and shrinking resources and experienced the angst of the bottom line and the question of how much or how little can we afford to pay the order of ministry? I walked through a park after extricating myself from a situation wherein I knew that whatever action I took could not bring peace to my troubled soul. All of these situations were reminders of life beyond the comfort zone.

I ached for families that were being wounded by possible marital breakdown. I was both awed by and concerned about the courage of my friend to live an alternate lifestyle, knowing the challenges that this would bring both in the home and workplace. I was touched by the duality of the Angel of Death as Grim Reaper who would leave a family bereft, and at the same time, the great Liberator who would set free a trapped soul, and end suffering.

Throughout this week I have also sat at table with a friend who is also a therapist and our conversation included genuine laughter and tears shed in authenticity as we shared stories of the depth of love that we have known. I held hands in hospital rooms and prayed together with family as we waited the results of tests and prognosis. I sat in my office and chatted with members of this community who were in the building unexpectedly as was I. And after a conversation that began with me sharing, "I am troubled about this" and included both some heart felt sharing and some exchange of things trivial, I said, "You have helped me feel less troubled. Can we pray together?" And in that moment I felt a kinship with the Christ who before his arrest beseeched his disciples to stay awake and pray. And in that sacred sharing we all were a little outside of the comfort zone because we were standing together on the thin ice of vulnerability.

In moments of pain and uncertainty and in moments of vulnerability and authenticity the breath of God blows. And the rhetoric of Peter resounds even in those situations that cause us some pain and discomfort when the talk turns to separation and divorce, sexuality and death, "If God gave Gentiles the same gift that God gave to us when we came to believe in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I to hinder God?" It strikes me that if we love as Jesus loves then we do not hinder God with outdated attitudes, or in failing to embrace the fullness of our humanity.

Jesus wept at the tomb of a friend. Jesus said, "Let the children come." Jesus said in parable, "When you have done it for the least you have done it to me. And conversely when you have not exercised love and compassion on the least, then you have likewise denied me." Jesus said, "I give you a new commandment that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you should also love one another."

Shirley Maclaine may be right in suggesting that not harming another makes more sense than loving, but the gospel of Jesus Christ is not about common sense- it is about uncommon sense. To love as Christ means that we may need to find a comfortable niche beyond the comfort zone. May God bless and be glorified by us as we love one another as Christ. Amen.