

Beyond Sentiment

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Matthew 22:34-40

In a recent newspaper column, I shared this story told by a UCC colleague. He writes, “I once worked with a waiter I’ll call Alex. His car was covered in bumper stickers proclaiming an admirable allegiance to every social justice cause imaginable. His heart was on fire for the plight of Native Americans, marginalized workers, the earth and for oppressed minorities everywhere. But he was awful to work with. He’d steal tables from other waiters, shout at the dishwashers, refuse to share tips with busboys. He didn’t say ‘hello’ at the start of a shift and he didn’t say ‘goodbye’ when he left. He was unfailingly rude. One night after Alex marched out, an older water leaned against the bar and sighed, ‘Alex is one of those people who loves humanity but can’t stand people.’”

Anyone can slap a bumper sticker on a car. We live in a place where many older cars seem to be held together by a vast array of bumper stickers. But it is a lot easier to do that, to talk about love and decorate your car with words about love, than it is actually to do love.

Another story, shared with me by a church member: “I went to K-Mart to return something I had bought. I was third in line behind a man in a wheelchair and a confused older woman. The young girl at the Customer Service counter, the kind our culture often looks right through – overweight and unattractive – was helping the older woman when I got there. The woman kept needing things to be repeated and the customer service girl repeated everything sweetly and patiently, as if it were the first time she had said it.

“When she was finished, the older woman needed time to put her things slowly back into her purse, so the customer service girl moved to another register to help the man in the wheelchair. He moved painfully and very slowly. It took him about ten minutes to get out his charge card, sign the receipt and buy one toilet plunger. But the young woman stayed focused, kindly and totally, on him.

“When the transaction was completed, she walked around the counter and said to the man, ‘Now, where are we going to put this? Do you want it on the side?’ The man said no, that he wanted to keep his new toilet plunger in the chair with him. She said, ‘I’m afraid it will fall out.’ She then gently took his arm and wrapped it around the plunger, saying, ‘There, I think it will stay now.’ By then a long line had formed behind him, but she stayed attentive and focused on him until he slowly left. I never heard anyone complain. I think we were all enchanted.”

Says the story teller, “I was next in line and I said to her, ‘You are very kind.’ She smiled and said, ‘I try. I can’t always take as much time as I’d like when I get busy.’ Concludes our church member, ‘I still haven’t gotten her out of my mind... how she took that dull job and turned it into a ministry. There, in K-Mart of all places, I felt like I was on holy ground.’”

Do you suppose that young woman is who Jesus had in mind when he talked about loving God and loving neighbor as the two greatest commandments? Sometimes, particularly in this day of sound bytes and a 24 hour news cycle, we are guilty of oversimplification of complex issues. Yet, other times we can be guilty of the “overcomplexification” of the simple. I think that happens a lot when we – and by we I mean preachers – talk about Jesus and the Gospels. Yes, there is much in the Bible that needs to be explained, discussed and debated, much to be considered and reflected upon. Any of you who have ever been in a Bible study with me know just how much I like to do exactly that. And yet, there comes a time when it is time to stop talking and start living... when our faith becomes, not a way of talking, but a way of walking.

In our text, Jesus’ opponents want to play a little theological ping-pong with him. They want to debate him, indeed trap him: Pharisees 4 – Jesus 0. “Tell us, what is the greatest commandment?” They can’t wait to engage him in a debate. But in response, Jesus tells them nothing startling, nothing new. He tells them what they have already heard a thousand times, something they have heard since childhood: “Love God with all you have, and love your neighbor as yourself.” End of discussion – class dismissed.

A pastor shares this story: “When I first came to my present pulpit, a chapel in the middle of a university campus, people sometimes said after my sermons, ‘That was so interesting... very interesting. Never thought about the matter in just that way. I’ll have to think about that.’ I took all

this as a compliment. Later I realized that such cool comments – abstract, distant, disengaged – were merely the way the intellectuals keep themselves apart from the demands of the gospel. ‘We will have to think about all this, not that we are ever going to do anything about it.’ But in this text Jesus manages, in just a few snippets of conversation, to cut through all our defenses and ask, ‘How are you enacting your faith, the command to love, in your lives? You don’t need another discussion. You don’t require more understanding. It isn’t what you think, understand, know, feel or say about love, but what you do about love that will bring you true life.’ I think of the classic line by George Bernard Shaw: “Christianity might be a good thing if anyone ever tried it.” Or this from Mark Twain: “Everyone wants to visit the Vatican and see where St. Peter is buried. But no one wants to live like him”

In one of his novels, “The Glad River” Will Campbell tells the story of a small band of radical believers who call themselves, “The Neighborhood.” Their friendship sustains and renews them in the face of many challenges of life and faith. At the conclusion of the novel, two members of The Neighborhood bury the third member. One gives this eulogy: “We had good times together... and bad. We laughed together and we cried together... We sat on rushing riverbanks in the hills and whiled away many a summer afternoon on sleeping bayous. We read books and learned to talk like each other, argued about trivial things and took hard counsel about the things that mattered. But mostly...we just loved one another.”

And one final thought about this text. A British Anglican priest, Miles Tomlin, recalls that when he was at theological college, he had a wise old tutor who often greeted the students at the beginning of class with the question, “Good morning. How are the prostitutes?” He was not making a negative judgment on the morals of the seminarians. Rather he was reminding them that, as Christians, their concern was to be for the poor, the downtrodden, the needy, the sick and yes, the prostitutes. That was the supreme test for how they were doing as future Christian leaders.

My mind goes back to that wonder Customer Service young woman at K-Mart. She intuitively seemed to understand that love is more than sentimental, warm and fuzzy feelings; that we live out our faith by caring for people, irrespective of whether they be ally or enemy, friend or stranger, near at hand or far away. As Erich Fromm pointed out long ago, love is an attitude, something within us, and is not determined by what happens “out there” beyond us. But many people seem to suppose the very opposite: “Oh, I could become a loving person if I found the right spouse or the right family or the right friend... someone who is truly lovable.”

But that isn’t what Jesus is saying at all. No, to love and care for people is not to be assured of the right kind of people to care for. It is to be ourselves possessed of an attitude, a way of looking at people, again something inward that no outer circumstance can alter. This is an all-embracing, all consuming, 24/7 love that takes far more than the correct bumper sticker. Again, a way of walking not talking. Indeed it was Martin Luther who insisted that Christians are called to be nothing less than “Little Christ’s” to each other. He constantly asked, much to the consternation of church authorities, what good are our beliefs, our statements of faith, our creeds, if they don’t make any difference in the way we live, the way we treat each other, the way we care for each other. “They will know we are Christians by our love.”

Now I know I have said nothing startling or new today. But I think it is important sometimes to remind ourselves of the basics of our faith; to remind ourselves what we already know. As a black preacher once told me, “My congregation seldom says ‘Amen!’ to something it hasn’t heard before.” And I want to assure you that today I have not been suggesting you should do more and feel guilty if you do not. Rather, as I said earlier, I just don’t want us to confuse talking and thinking about love with actually doing love, and to remind you that a moderate, reasonable and cautious love is pretty much no love at all.

Finally, I turn to Barbara Brown Taylor, who beautifully sums up our text and our faith when she says, “Love a neighbor. Be a neighbor. And let’s not complicate things by arguing over specifics. You know what it means to love because some time or another you have been on the receiving end of it. If you want the world to look difference next time you go outside, do some love. Do a little, do a lot, but do some and do not forget to get some for yourself... Just do it and find out that when you do, you do live and live abundantly...just like the man said.”