

Learning how to Love

To love means to engage in repentance and accountability with one another.

As I live, says the Lord GOD, I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but that the wicked turn from their ways and live
So then Teach me, O LORD, the way of your statutes, and I will observe it to the end.

Lead me in the path of your commandments, for I delight in it.

The commandments we hear, "You shall not commit adultery; You shall not murder; You shall not steal; You shall not covet"; and any other commandment, are summed up in this word, "Love your neighbor as yourself."

And if another member of the church sins against you, go and point out the fault when the two of you are alone. And then If the member listens to you, you have regained that one.

I the Lord God am there among you.

In today's readings, yes even in our Matthew text, we see a glimpse of the ways of love. Love, as Paul says, is the fulfillment of the law of the prophets, the law that Jesus came not to abolish but to fulfill in his very body and being with the world. Love that is the sum of all the commandments offered to God's people. Later in Matthew we hear Jesus' call that to love God with your whole heart, mind, and soul is the greatest commandment followed by the close second - to love your neighbor as yourself.

Love. A term used over hundreds of times in Scripture depending on translation and meaning. Love, used at least once a day to describe my emotions towards my dog, oreo cookies, trees, my commitment to Nate. Love. The "great intangible" poet Diane Ackerman once said. It's often described as a feeling, an instinct that arises without our intention. It's expected that we'll learn it in our family unit or in a romantic relationship, but love isn't necessarily in either of these contexts. It's such a messy, complex, often clouded over word that we either overuse it or rarely use it and never have much of a firm foundation to really understand it. And though we so often attribute it to various meanings and people and things, our readings today offer a way to love in a community, in a people seeking to be faithful to God and one another.

I'd like to offer that what we hear God saying to us in our readings is that to love means that we need to engage in repentance and accountability to and with one another.

Where do we see this invitation? Let's start with Ezekiel. We are dropped into the Ezekiel reading with the Israelite people in a bit of a crisis to say the least. Chapter 33 is the turning point between condemnation and Ezekiel's vision of restoration for his people. His people being the Israelites. God's chosen people whom he loves and who have been invited into a loving covenant with Him. And yet after years of being tossed back and forth between empires and kings without a care for them, these people, God's people, have forgotten a part of loving God. Their capitol is about to fall and they are in the midst of occupation and exile from their land and it is in this moment we see for the first time the Israelites acknowledge their sin and ask how to live.

"Our transgressions and our sins weigh upon us, and we waste away because of them; how then can we live?" They see and express the heaviness of their wrongdoings and look to God for saving. Rather than blaming their fathers and mothers or even God as they have done before, they take upon themselves this acknowledgement of their collective wrongdoing. They take that first step of repentance. The step of learning how to be honest with themselves and God and in doing so, relearn how to love and trust the God who will ultimately restore them.

And God, almost as if He'd been waiting for this simple acknowledgement from his people, says "of course I don't want you to die. You are my people who I chose to love. I want you to *live* and life with me comes in your turning away from these paths of sin - for the Israelites it was a turning away from moral corruption, distrust and rebellion against God's guidance and sovereignty but in this we hear the invitation, the almost plea from God to turn away from all forms of sin, especially that of the collective. For the Israelites, relearning how to love the God who loves them meant learning how to see themselves honestly and repent for the ways they have missed the mark.

To love means to engage in repentance to and with one another.

On April 11, 2017, my pastor was arrested. No not our pastors here. That afternoon, Pastor Stephen Handy and a group of Christians, myself among them, walked the 5 blocks from our church to the Tennessee state capitol building and arrived with one hour til closing time. We gathered in the governor's office to pray, take communion and hold the governor and state legislature accountable to expanding the Tennessee medicaid program to the more than 280,000 people in the state without healthcare. While we witnessed state after state expand its healthcare coverage to help thousands of people have access to necessary medication, surgeries, and rehab, Tennessee was among a handful of states whose leaders were unwilling to change their ways. And up until this point we had sent letters, held meetings with other state officials, begging for the right thing to be done for the sake of the lives of so many across the state.

Our invitation that day was to love. To love those who without access to healthcare were dying in the streets and hidden away in homes without proper medication and support. To love even at the risk of losing support from their voter base. To love even at the risk of what that might mean for the power they hold. Alas, Governor Haslam did not listen to our calls to accountability, did not listen to our invitation to love, instead he had arrested those who stayed past the closing time, Pastor Stephen among them. And though Tennessee has yet to expand this needed care, committed people across all religious lines continue the loving work of accountability.

To love means to engage in accountability to and with one another.

Now to be clear this work is not easy. It is not just to God or state authorities in which this engagement is necessary. For we see in the Matthew text not one, not two, but three steps of accountability and invitations for repentance described for the local church community.

And maybe even more than paying attention to the form of the instructions, given it is to a particular community in a particular time, we take some time to consider the underlying reality the instructions speak to which is that being apart of a loving community of believers - the church - does not mean there won't be conflicts, betrayals, or negative outcomes from well-meaning intentions.

Rather, it's expected that in the midst of trying to love each other, we will cause harm, we will have missteps in our assumptions, in our ways of setting up life together, even in the things we take for granted.

So if we then know that even amid the most faithful communities that sin is going to take place, perhaps then we have to ask, *how* do we do repentance and accountability? If we agree that to love means engaging in these practices, then I guess what we are left with is working out how we do that in ways rooted in faithfulness and hope

And ironically I think it's a chicken and egg kind of answer. That just as to love means to engage in repentance and accountability, to engage in repentance and accountability well we must learn how to love. I gotta say this again because it smacked me in the face after lots of days wrestling with God and these texts.

That just as loving each other means repenting and holding one another accountable when we do harm each other, to do that repenting and accountability well, we have to learn how to love each other in fuller and deeper ways.

Follow me here because I promise I am gonna keep this short.

I'm gonna draw from two wise people what I call paper preachers - M. Scott Peck and bell hooks. Peck says to love means we extend ourselves for the purpose of "nurturing one's own or another's spiritual growth. It is both an act and intention." We don't have to do it, it is not a feeling that suddenly emerges but it is something we choose to do. We see God choosing over and over to be committed in care to the Israelites even as they turned away again and again. I bring with me the memories and continued voices of those who in love work for the well-being and care of those in Tennessee and other places.

This love described by Peck pushes against the kind of feeling or fate-based love and draws together bell hooks' ingredients of "care, affection, recognition, respect, commitment, and trust, as well as honest and open communication." To repent, to hold accountability with one another in faithful ways that promote healing and restoration, we must consider whether we have those love ingredients - that we care for one another in real and tangible ways, that we are committed to one another that is so hard to come by in a world shaped by

individualism and greed, that we take the long path of cultivating trust with one another.

And not just with one another but it starts with ourselves. Can we turn inward with those love ingredients of care and honesty to see the ways we missed the mark in not loving each other and those not here well? To learn how to love ourselves and others better requires from us a willingness to risk being honest with ourselves and others in all the ways we are often not encouraged to in a culture and in systems that don't reward our honest and vulnerable expressions of humanity. This takes intentional work, love work, cultivating trust and a willingness to lean in to say the hard things and receive the hard things.

This reminds me of Pastor Ayebale noting the importance of our stories last week. That to remember our stories, to know honestly our histories both individually and communally is to both remember our belovedness in God as well as to receive wisdom about how to grow in loving ourselves and others better. Can we trust ourselves, each other, and God to look with honest and open eyes to the complexities of our stories?

This is the invitation that God holds for the Israelite people, and the same one Jesus offers for his followers then and now. To love God and love our neighbors as ourselves requires repentance and accountability when we inevitably hurt each other. And that same repentance and accountability, if we desire to engage in it faithfully and with hope towards restoration, requires that we learn to love one another in fuller and deeper ways.

Church I have hope for us in this. I have been witness to the ways we have been faithful to this invitation and I look forward to leaning in together towards deeper engagements of repentance and accountability as we learn how to love God and one another in deeper and more faithful ways.

Amen.