

Perspectives on Love – Teresa Holden

2 Samuel 11:1-15; Psalm 14; Ephesians 3:14-21; John 6: 1-21

Our Scriptures for today are full of drama. Big things happen, as we catch glimpses of people who are grappling with very basic needs and appetites. These Scriptures deal with the core of what drives people – hungers that at times can seem overwhelming and irrepressible. Through these Scriptures we gain some perspectives on love and specifically God's love for us.

Love has been in the air around here lately. If we start with Zach and Amanda's wedding last year, we, as a community, have celebrated at least five marriages in the past year. Being a college professor offers a front-row view on the budding of young love, and I have gained some wonderful insights on love from working the better part of more than 15 years in a college setting.

Love has an incredibly transformative power that is evidenced in some amazing ways. In fact, I believe that only love has the potential to change the world. I have a theory that the 20th century American Civil Rights movement achieved the success that it did in part because at the heart of Martin Luther King's message was the Christian ethic of love. On an individual basis, often, people look different after they have found love. Some of this may have to do with the fact that generally people comb their hair and bathe regularly when they want to be appealing to a particular person. But, beyond that, in a good relationship, each person becomes better. Said another way, people in a good couple bring out the best in each other. I think that is a good test of a relationship since love flows from God. As a gift from God, all love should make people better. Even for people who aren't married or in a relationship, the love of family and friends challenges people to be better and reinforces the good qualities that people possess.

From that perspective, today's Old Testament reading brings us the story of David and Bathsheba. Remember that David in last week's Scripture was fully committed to building God a temple. In this week's Scripture he gets a little distracted from this (or any other goal) and makes despicably terrible choices that violate common sense, as well as any sense of morality or ethics. He does this all in the process of trying to satisfy a physical longing, a hunger that he has. Maybe in David's mind, despite all of his power and wives, he hasn't found his one great love, and he thinks Bathsheba is the one.

I'm not really sure how true love is possible when one of the people has complete and utter power over the other one. Even if that weren't a problem in this relationship, David's manipulations and evil deeds are a clear sign that this relationship is leading the wrong way. Ultimately, in the next chapter (chapter 12), God confronts David about his actions through the prophet Nathan. He says, "I anointed you king over Israel, and I delivered you from the hand of

Saul. I gave your master's house to you, and your master's wives into your arms. I gave you all Israel and Judah. And if all this had been too little, I would have given you even more. Why did you despise the word of the Lord by doing what is evil in his eyes?" David's passion caused him to lose all sense of his priorities, of the important and enduring aspects of his life. Worst of all, he forgot about his relationship with God.

Although we are justified in condemning David, we can also recognize in him a tendency that we all possess. In some aspects of our lives we are all guilty of trying to manipulate or control situations, to take matters into our own hands. David was in an unusual position of power that caused him to be able to manipulate every aspect of his relationship with Bathsheba to his advantage. He sought love, a meaningful connection and relationship with another person, and he had the power to orchestrate his own love connection. None of us has the power of a ruler like David, but we all wrestle with the temptation to take control of the aspects of our lives that we hold most precious without thinking of or consulting God.

Psalm 14 underscores and reiterates the truth of just how quickly people can forget God. In verse 4, the Psalmist explains the fact that people become corrupt when they don't call upon the Lord. In the context of the rest of these passages, we can interpret from Psalm 14 that not calling upon the Lord can lead to big mistakes as people try to satisfy their basic longings.

In contrast when Jesus feeds the crowd of 5,000 people, he anticipates their physical hunger and illustrates the principle that God will supply what we need. In this story, we see the fact that Jesus anticipated the needs of those who came out to hear him. In other instances the Bible doesn't hesitate to tell us when people become disgruntled at Jesus, when they complain or whine, which in this passage makes it significant that we don't hear about any complaints. People aren't thronging Jesus asking him to feed them. Rather, Jesus anticipates the crowd's needs; he cares that they are hungry. This is an instance of actions speaking louder than words. Jesus shows his love by taking personal responsibility for satisfying the physical hunger of the crowd.

Each of the gospels tells this story similarly. Jesus has been pursued by a crowd that has grown to a size that is roughly as big as the population of Greenville (depending on the side town one enters). It seems as though the group is mixed in gender and age. As I try to imagine the scene of these people following Jesus, listening to Him and seeking healing from Him, I wonder if they naturally gathered themselves as they would have in the temple – with the women separated from the men. We can imagine the children running around the edges of the crowd, doing what our children do when we gather at the McPeak farm – chasing butterflies, looking for lizards, falling down and scraping their knees, squabbling. One thing we can know for sure, children being who they are, and that is when hunger began to set in, they were the first to complain. We can imagine some amount of children's wailing and even screaming taking place while mothers jump into action.

I don't necessarily think that all of these people had come unprepared, with no food whatsoever to sustain them. Maybe by the time that Jesus addressed their hunger, so much time had elapsed that most everyone had eaten all the food they had brought with them, all except the boy with the five loaves and two fish.

The question Jesus asks his disciples, "Where are we to buy bread for the people to eat?" is surprising to me, as I've never imagined that there were vendors or roadside stands (at this point of history) where travelers could buy food. Apparently there were. The disciples do what I would have done in response to Jesus' question— they think in very practical terms: "Well, we have 5,000 people. If we get everyone a Quarter Pounder meal, that's gonna be about \$5 per person, or \$25,000 total – that's about ½ a year's salary I'm not really making a lot of money right now, cause I left my fishing nets to be a disciple, and so did everyone else. I don't really know how we're going to pay for that." So practical.

But Jesus' common sense approach is a dramatic display of his love. He puts into action what he has told previous crowds. On another day in a similar situation, Jesus had told a crowd: Do not worry about your life, what you will eat or drink; or about your body, what you will wear. Look at the birds of the air; they do not sow or reap or store away in barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not much more valuable than they? . . . Seek first His kingdom and His righteousness, and all these things will be given to you."

In dramatic fashion, on this particular day, Jesus is going to take care of the needs of those who have flocked to follow him.

Imagine the scene when the disciples start to pass out the loaves and fish. They encouraged people to take as much as they wanted, and the food just kept stretching to feed more and more people.

This summer I've been in a pizza dough making phase of my life. I discovered this great recipe for pizza dough in my Julia Child cookbook, and we've had plenty of sunshine streaming into my house that has provided the warm, non-drafty environment in which yeast dough rises just like it's supposed to. One day I decided to double the pizza dough recipe. I have big eaters in my house, and we were going to have a guest at dinner who is also a big eater. I put the dough into my two largest bowls to rise. After it had risen, I began to roll it into circles for pizza. Every time I would finish a circle and turn back to my bowl, it seemed like the dough had multiplied itself again. I seemed to have magically-multiplying dough to the extent that I began to exclaim to my family that I believed we were possibly experiencing a repeat of this very event – Jesus feeding of the 5,000. While I think in my case, my yeast was especially potent, and I had overestimated the amount of dough I needed, I think that this is exactly how this miracle happened. As the food was passed from hand to hand, the amount didn't diminish. It became more than enough to satisfy everyone present. This event perfectly illustrates the fact that God's love isn't just esoteric, just a theory, but it's real and it reaches down to where we live.

We are free to pursue the purposes God has for us because we don't need to worry about where our next meal is going to come from.

Still, it's very hard not to worry if you're unemployed or penniless or your income doesn't cover your bills. But God tells us very clearly here to not worry, rather to believe that God will care for us to an even greater extent than the birds that live in the trees in our yards. Our faith in God's love for us has to give us assurance that God will meet our needs in unbelievable ways.

This is exactly the message Paul conveys in Ephesians. The words Paul uses echo the personal love and care that God expressed to David and that Jesus showed to the crowd that followed him. Our English translation makes this one of the most beautifully poetic writings of Paul: "I pray that you may have the power to comprehend, with all the saints, what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, so that you may be filled with all the fullness of God." Paul goes on to couple God's love with God's power, power that allows us to surpass ourselves, and what we think we can expect of ourselves. It is this power of God to transform people through love that is present when two people in a couple make each other better. God's love is a force that calls us not just to better actions, but also to deeper faith. This faith allows us to believe that God is "at work within us" making us "able to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine. To him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations, forever and ever. Amen."