

Love Wins

Love, according to a prominent theologian, is a notoriously ambiguous “weasel word.” I didn’t know what a “weasel word” was, but it didn’t sound good. So I looked it up. A “weasel word” is a word or phrase that’s used to create an impression that a meaningful statement has been made, but really only a vague or ambiguous claim has actually been communicated. I knew immediately what that meant.

At an Interfaith Center meeting last week, we were trying to come up with a title for a new children’s program. Someone suggested “Interfaith Families for Peace.” Someone else remarked, “No, peace is such a meaningless word.” I was shocked at first, but had to agree with the reasoning behind it. I got it: “peace” has also become a “weasel word.”

How sad that two of the most important words in the church have become so trite - two words that are so integral to this season. Although with strains of *Silent Night* and *O Little Town of Bethlehem* assaulting our ears in every store and restaurant, it’s no wonder. I was sitting in Peet’s on Thursday, reading the news. In the background was Bing Crosby singing “Silent Night” and I wanted to scream, “They’re committing war crimes in Aleppo, you idiot!”

But today is the fourth Sunday in Advent when we light a candle for Love. And if it’s going to be more than a “weasel word,” we have to be very intentional about what love is. But what is it? Despite the millions of poems, songs, and works of art devoted to love, few actually define it. In fact, Jules Toner, author of the book *The Experience of Love*, said “Those who write best about love devote very little space to considering what love is.”

But some have tried to get a better handle on this pervasive yet elusive, crazy little thing called love. Some years ago, Leo Buscaglia, a professor in the Department of Special Education at the University of Southern California, distressed by the suicide of one of his students, proposed to teach a course on the subject of love. Some of his fellow faculty members dismissed the subject as “irrelevant.” One mockingly asked whether the class would have a lab requirement and with a leer asked if Buscaglia would be the primary investigator.

But he was serious; this wasn’t a frivolous thing for him. He did get to teach the course, but only on the condition that he teach it free of salary in his spare time and there would be no course credit given for it. Over the three years that followed, the course - not a scholarly or deeply philosophical study of love but “a sharing of some of the practical and vital ideas, feelings and observations” related to the human condition - earned Buscaglia the name “Dr. Love” and became one of the university’s most popular classes.

Still, it was hard for those trained in more academic ways to get it. He recounted that when he was asked to speak, he'd be asked, "Will you talk about love?"

"Sure," he'd say.

"What's your title?" they'd want to know.

"Let's just call it love," he'd reply.

There would be a brief hesitation, then, "Well, you know this is a professional meeting and it may not be understood."

So he'd suggest 'Affect as a Behavior Modifier' and they'd be happy with that.

Since then, there have been more scientific studies into love. One researcher, Thomas Jay Oord, took a stab at it in his book - with the very academic title, *Defining Love: A Philosophical, Scientific and Theological Engagement*. His definition: "To love is to act intentionally, in sympathetic response to others (including God), to promote overall well-being." That's pretty dry. Yet he and other researchers identified ten ways that love promotes well-being: celebration, respect, generativity, forgiveness, courage, humor, compassion, loyalty, listening and creativity. Sounds a lot like our list of words to describe First United.

I think we can add another word to that list: vulnerability. We allow ourselves to be our most vulnerable only with those we love (well, maybe our therapists, but they're paid for the privilege). And even that's hard sometimes. To be so completely known by another can be a frightening thing. And some people who have been hurt by a loved one can be very wary of ever allowing their heart to be so open again. Yet that is what it takes to love and be loved: the daring risk to be vulnerable and the willing-ness to carefully hold the vulnerability of another.

Maybe that's why we're so taken with the Nativity myth. The idea that God would allow God's self to become as vulnerable as a newborn baby is an unusual view of Divinity. When we think of Divinity, we usually think in terms of Almighty, All Powerful, Majestic, Omniscient, Omnipresent, etc., etc. Certainly not weak, powerless, utterly dependent on others - so much like us, and frankly not us as we like to be reminded we are.

So at Christmas, we are reminded of this great Love, cosmic in its expansiveness, yet also so near to you and to me to be able to know the depths of our hearts, to laugh along with us in our joys and to suffer with us in our pains and sorrows. This great Love also resides in our hearts, and to the extent we allow ourselves to acknowledge it, we're able to extend love to ourselves and to others. This love isn't a "weasel word." This is the real deal.

And yes, love can have consequences. It can get us hurt. The life and death of Jesus is the ultimate example of the riskiness of vulnerability and openness to love. But there are many

ways we might be called to pay the price for love.

Yesterday, the banner went up outside the church announcing to all who pass by that “Immigrants and Refugees Are Welcome Here.” It took us a while to get all of the Turk & Lyon congregations on board with doing it – which was good. I didn’t want us to put it up merely as a political statement, but as a real invitation to real people who may be very vulnerable in the coming months. Questions about what we’re really equipped to do, what we’re willing to do, what we know how to do are important ones.

Thankfully, we have a wonderful resource in Maria Eitz from the Sophia in Trinity congregation who has contacts from her former parish who were involved in the Sanctuary movement for Central American refugees in the 80s. Maria is ready and willing to be part of the leadership of this movement should we be called upon to act.

What we might be called upon to do is unclear. Yes, San Francisco is a Sanctuary City. But a *Chronicle* headline this week warned of possible dangers ahead: “The sanctuary battle: a test of San Francisco’s soul.”

“Now the question is whether Mayor Lee will have the same determination to defend the more than 44,000 immigrants living in San Francisco without documentation. All of them -including about 35% who are Asian - are at growing risk as the Trump administration prepares to take power. Lee staged a defiant press event in the City Hall rotunda to affirm SF’s status as a sanctuary city. ‘We will always be San Francisco, he declared. ‘A city of refuge, a city of sanctuary, a city of love.’ Beautiful words, but many city officials and immigration advocates are wondering how strongly Lee will back them up, particularly as he grapples with a shrinking city budget and likely federal cutbacks.”

We may be called upon to put ourselves out there in a way that goes beyond simply putting up a banner. Although, *by* putting up that banner we have made ourselves vulnerable. As disciples of Jesus. As disciples of Love.

You see that Mary and Joseph are on the banner as symbols of refugees. But I would add that they also represent the process of the presence of Divinity being birthed into the world: a presence of infinite and intimate Love.

Why is God so often equated with love? It is no simple question. Love appears to be a self-replenishing spiritual force, beyond human understanding. As Romeo exclaims to Juliet in one of history’s most famous love stories: “My bounty is as boundless as the sea, my love as deep, the more I give to thee, the more I have. For both are infinite.”

For God, love is not a “weasel word.” Nor is peace or hope or joy or justice. These words are real; they have power. These candles that we light are not flickers in the overwhelming

darkness; they are beacons to the world.

I saw a video Christmas message from renowned biblical scholar John Dominic Crossan: "Caesars and Christs come in many different forms & sizes." We might feel intimidated by the power of empire – and there are reasons to be afraid. But we can also be heartened, encouraged, emboldened by the many forms that Christ will take in the midst of it. Those forms will sometimes be you, me, us.

We are not “weasel words.” We will mean what we say and say what we mean. And tonight, we say, “Love wins.”

Amen

Isaiah 7:10-16

*This is another of the many Old Testament prophecies interpreted by the church as predictions of the Messiah. However, Isaiah was likely indicating a young woman at the court of Ahaz who was present during the prophecy. The Hebrew word *almah* simply means an unmarried adolescent girl, or a woman of marriageable age. A different word, *bethulah*, is the term for a virgin. A growing number of scholars think that this young woman is the prophet referred to in 8:13, and that the child she conceives with Isaiah, whom he calls *Maher-shala-hash-baz*, is the same child whom she will call *Immanuel*.*

It is written . . .

Once more YHWH spoke to Ahaz and said, “Ask for sign from YHWH your God; let it be deep as the netherworld or high as the sky!”

But Ahaz answered, “I will not ask; I will not put YHWH to a test.”

Then Isaiah said: "Listen, O house of David! Is it not enough for you to weary those around you, must you also weary my God? Therefore the Holy One will give you a sign: this young woman will become pregnant and will give birth. You will name the child Immanu-el. This child will be living on curds and honey by the time it knows how to refuse evil and do good. But before that – before the child knows how to refuse evil and do good - the land of the two rulers you dread will be laid waste.”

Romans 1:1-7

Paul’s salutation to the Christians in Rome roots Christ’s life in the history of the Jewish people. Jesus took flesh – that is, he became human and is fully human – in the line of David. He has David’s DNA and we share many of the same genetic markers with the Savior. Although the resurrection is beyond our comprehension, we can still affirm solidarity between Jesus and humankind. We are related. Regardless of our ethnicity, we

belong to Christ. God is with us and in us, as intimate as our DNA.

It is written . . .

From Paul, a servant of Christ Jesus, called to be an apostle and set apart to proclaim the Good News, which God promised long ago through the prophets, as the holy scriptures record – the Good News concerning God’s Only Begotten, who was descended from David according to the flesh, but was made the Only Begotten of God in power, according to the spirit of holiness, by the resurrection from the dead: Jesus Christ our Savior. We have been favored with apostleship, that we may bring to obedient faith all the nations, among whom you have been called to belong to Jesus Christ;
To all in Rome, beloved of God and called to be holy people: Grace and peace from our Abba God our Father and our Savior Jesus Christ.

Matthew 1:18-25

Under Roman rule, the people longed for a ruler like David, but also for someone to speak to them like the prophets of old. When Jesus came along, they looked back for signs of how God had worked through their ancestors: miraculous conceptions and births, promises of newborn kings who would lead the people in a new way. We now wait and hope expectantly for what God is birthing new in this world and in our lives. So we read the story over and over again, year after year, as the people read the prophets of old. We read the old, old stories, and look for the newness of God to break through.

It is written . . .

This is how the birth of Jesus came about. When Jesus’ mother Mary was engaged to Joseph, but before they lived together, she was found to be pregnant through the Holy Spirit. Joseph, her husband, an upright person unwilling to disgrace her, decided to divorce her quietly.

This was Joseph’s intention when suddenly the angel of God appeared in a dream and said, "Joseph, heir to the House of David, don’t be afraid to wed Mary; it is by the Holy Spirit that she has conceived for the child. She is to have a son, and you are to name him Jesus – Salvation - because for he will save the people from their sins."

All this took place to fulfill what God has said through the prophet:

"The virgin will be with child
and give birth,
and the child will be named
Immanuel"

A name that means "God is with us."

When Joseph awoke, he did as the angel of God had directed, and they went ahead with the marriage, but had no marital relations with her until she had given birth; she had a son; and they named him Jesus.