



Sermon preached by Revd Nigel Uden on 28th April 2024

Readings: *Acts 8.26-40; 1 John 4:7-21; John 15.1-8*

Easter V

I want to confess to you that when I saw the Epistle reading was about love, I thought to myself, 'Oh no, not 'love' again'. What I mean is that preachers like me too often seem to bring everything back to love. Is there nothing less sentimental, nothing more sophisticated, nothing more cutting edge for a world on the brink?

But that reaction itself got me thinking. A much-valued and respected colleague is at his retirement service this very morning, and when we were speaking on Monday he told me that his last two sermons – the summation of forty-five years preaching – were, first on the Great Commission, 'go and make disciples',¹ and finally, on the Great Commandments, to love God and neighbour.² Hearing *him* say that brought me up short. He is a conservative evangelical and it is instructive for me to hear that when all else had been said, it is Love to which his final words after forty-five years would point. And what that minister was doing is echoing this morning's epistle reading:

'The commandment we have from [God] is this:
those who love God must love their brothers and sisters also.'³

Of course, it isn't only preachers that go on about love. Poets seem to, as well. Shakespeare's sonnets, Mary Oliver, e.e. cummings, and not least Alfred, Lord Tennyson, for whom, when contemplating bereavement, love is the beginning and the end of all things:

'God gives us love. Something to love
He lends us; but, when love is grown
To ripeness, that on which it throve
Falls off, and love is left alone.'⁴

Indeed, in another poem, that nineteenth century Poet Laureate put the imperative to love even more starkly than does St John:

'he that shuts Love out,
in turn shall be shut out from Love.'⁵

I wonder if my reaction to being pointed back to love, is because actually, to love in the compulsory and dedicated way that preachers and poets seem to suggest isn't easy. Maybe we struggle to love because we simply don't *like* the object we're supposed to love. Maybe we struggle to love because our cultures are so different that we have little in common. Maybe we struggle to love because we don't understand another's neurodiversity or identity. Maybe we struggle to love because of resentment or jealousy, or even fear. Maybe we struggle to love because of unresolved hurts or irreparably shattered trust. Or maybe we struggle to love because it feels too much like a superficial or hasty repair of wrongs that justice needs to see addressed rather than camouflaged. As Myisha Cherry says in her recent book about forgiveness, 'Sometimes the most creative thing we can do is to recognise and admit that something cannot be repaired.'⁶

And yet ... and yet ... does articulating, understanding why we find loving difficult release us from the preachers' and the poets' insistence that it is love that matters? I don't think it does. It may enable us to

¹ Matthew 28.19

² Mark 12.28ff

³ I John 4.21

⁴ Tennyson, Alfred, Lord 1833 *To JS* - addressed to James Spedding on the death of his brother Edward.

⁵ Tennyson, Alfred, Lord 1832 *To ---* - dedicated to Richard Trench, a member of the Cambridge Apostles

⁶ Cherry, Myisha 2023 *Failures of Forgiveness: what we get wrong and how to do better* Princeton: Princeton University Press, page 187; quoted in *Philosophy Now* Issue 161 April/May 2024 page 52

be loving in the way we insist upon loving, but it does not remove the imperative. To quote Shakespeare's *Sonnet 116*:

'love is not love
Which alters when it alteration finds,
Or bends with the remover to remove.
O no, it is an ever-fixed mark
That looks on tempests and is never shaken.'⁷

So, even as I still wrestled with 'Oh, not 'love' again', I found myself looking for help in the big ideas that today's readings explore. First, that 'God is love',⁸ and then that bit about vines and branches.⁹ And they were helpful, you see, because like the Ethiopian, I need help to understand.

If we believe in God, to say that *God* is love, lends a persuasive motive to *our* needing to love. As St John suggests, *our* loving is derived from *God's* loving. Made in the image of a God defined as love, human beings somewhat inevitably have a vocation to love, don't they?

That said, as soon as we wonder what it means to say 'God is love', we have to 'admit the impediment' that our handle upon God's love is seriously limited by our human understanding of love. In his 1962 book, *On the Love of God*, John McIntyre recognises that confining God's love to what we can get our heads around 'begins to be an error, when we picture God's [love] being too much in terms of human emotions, instability, narrowness of sympathy ..., or even in rather crude physical categories.'¹⁰ Nevertheless, Professor McIntyre goes on to give us what I find to be six really helpful concepts by which to understand the love of God. Maybe they can also be pointers to what it might mean for *us* to love.

He suggests that God's love is about God's *concern*. No corner of life is excepted from God's concern; there is no time limit on God's concern, and nor do any circumstances alter God's concern for all that is, for you, and for me.

This concern issues in God's *commitment*. God's love, you see, is no mere whim, it is a choice and a decision, which leads to God's pledge and promise to love, 'beyond the uttermost'.¹¹

We all know how human commitment is expressed through *communicating*, and so is God's. But when God communicates, the Word is not expressed only in words, but in taking human flesh and dwelling with us, setting up home amongst us, and so God's love is not just what God is and says, but also where God puts Godself, rooted 'here in the dust and joy of human life'.¹²

And of course, as soon as there is communication like that, there is the essence of *community* – the community of God with creation, and of God with us. God offers Godself fully, openly, unconditionally. And such is the generous spirit of the community life that God's love inspires and enables in us, too. A welcome of 'No ifs, no buts', we might say.

But the connection of being in community isn't passive. It's about *involvement*. As a recent self-help book for lovers has it, 'connection is work, not a feeling'.¹³ God made that obvious on the Cross, where we see God's involvement past the 'point of no return' – that cross is that love which intends to remove the walls that divide us. And such is the involved loving to which we are called.

Ultimately, Love is God's *identity*. It's what God is – God is love. And it's what God reveals in Jesus Christ. Remember how at his Baptism Jesus hears God speak of how he is God's beloved Son?¹⁴ Well,

⁷ Shakespeare, William - Sonnet 116, *Let me not to the marriage of true minds admit impediments*.

⁸ I John 4.8

⁹ John 15.5f

¹⁰ McIntyre, John 1962 *On the Love of God* London: Collins page 58

¹¹ Fred Pratt Green 1903-2000, from the Hymn *An upper room did our Lord prepare*, RS 438.4.2

¹² Geoffrey Hoyland, 1889-1965, from the hymn *Lord of good life*, RS 533.4.4

¹³ King, Vex 2024 *Things no one taught us about love: How to build healthy relationships with yourself and with others*. London: Bluebird, back cover

¹⁴ Matthew 3.17, et al

such is the gift of Baptism to us, as well; it is the expression *par excellence* that we are loved by God and ever shall be, ‘even when we don’t know it.’ And that is our identity. It is and must be the Christian’s only boast, that we are loved by God.

And all we can do is *respond* – with love for God and for neighbour. Which brings us back to where I began.

If you are like me that is all impressive, and very demanding. God may well be identified by their concern, commitment, and communication, by their community and involvement, but how might we, how dare we reflect that image in who we are. The imperative to love is still not easy.

And that is why we need the vine and branches image. We are not bidden to dredge up this measure of loving from our inner resources. Nor can we buy it, even from the finest quality retailer. Only from the one whose image we bear can we gain the resources to love as that One loved us. We are to be as close to Jesus, as embedded into Jesus, as is a branch engrafted into a vine. You see, as Alex put it a few moments ago, ‘connected to Jesus, we get the water we need to grow’; to love.

Ultimately, says McIntyre, to love as we are called to love, the thing we need is imagination. As if familiar with what we are living through in our own era, he puts it like this:

‘Applied to the situation before us now, imagination will lead us to a quite new view of our fellows of other races, and social groups; we shall see them as ourselves, [siblings] also for whom Christ died. Perhaps we shall then see them for the first time, as real persons, with hopes, fears, ambitions and joys like our own. Imagination will lead us to a new realisation that the barriers are down, [we *can* love] because Christ has ... removed the barriers.’¹⁵ End quote.

Do we understand the call to love God and neighbour as beckoning us to be more imaginative? When I try that, and not least when I imagine myself to be a branch engrafted to a life-giving, love-modelling vine, somehow, even if the imperative to love is not made easy, it is conceivable. And that which we conceive is surely that which can bear the fruit of the love by which the world’s barriers can be cast down. So, struggling to love someone we don’t like – be it neighbour or nation, how would it be if we imagined them to be living with the same dilemmas and difficulties as we do? Struggling to love those we don’t understand, how would it be if we imagined them having to bend over backwards to understand us, as well? Struggling to love those of whom we are jealous, how would it be if we imagined them similarly dissatisfied, or empty? Struggling to love what we feel angry towards or estranged from, or frightened of, how would it be if we imagined them to be siblings also for whom Christ died?

So, yes, it *is* love again! There’s always more to say about love. More that’s not sentiment, more that begins to nudge towards sophistication, and more that gives to our loving-as-God-loves-us the cutting edge that will enable us to make a difference to a world on the brink.

‘We love because God first loved us.’ Engrafted to that vine, we go to love. Amen

N. P. Uden
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¹⁵ McIntyre, page 122