

The Fruit of the Spirit: Love

Hosea 11:1-11

John 13:12-16; 34-35; 15:12-17

I Corinthians 13:4-8a

“I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another.”

“Selfishness won,” I read in the dawn’s early light of Independence Day. The declarative sentence was written by novelist Kurt Anderson on the Op-Ed page of the New York Times as he invited 4th of July revelers to consider the downside of liberty. He goes on to say that “From the beginning the American idea embodied a tension between radical individualism and the demands of the commonweal. The [Declaration of Independence] says in its second line that axiomatic human rights include ‘Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness’—individualism in a nutshell. But the Declaration’s author was not a greed-is-good guy: ‘Self-love,’ Jefferson wrote to a friend 38 years after the Declaration, ‘is no part of morality. Indeed it is exactly its counterpart. It is the sole antagonist of virtue leading us constantly by our propensities to self-gratification in violation of our moral duties to others.’”

Anderson goes on to cite those times in our nation’s history when we overly indulged these self-gratifying propensities; but he notes that in each case an economic crisis coupled with moral disapproval righted the ship of state and returned the common life to some sort of equilibrium. Today it would seem that we have the economic crisis without the moral disapproval. Thanks to the 60s, says Anderson, when “a grand bargain was forged between the counterculture and the establishment, between the forever-young and the moneyed,” we all have become “shamelessly selfish.” “All” includes the indulgent self-expression and hedonism of each succeeding generation of youthful masses and “all” includes the unshackled capitalists who have been “free to indulge their own animal spirits with fewer and fewer fetters in the forms of regulation, taxes or social opprobrium.”

Jefferson anticipates our present predicament in the same 1814 letter, writing that “our tendencies toward selfishness where liberty and our pursuit of happiness lead us require ‘correctives which are supplied by education’ and by ‘the moralist, the preacher and the legislator.’” “On this Independence Day,” Anderson concludes, “I’m doing my small preacherly bit”; on this Sunday after Independence Day, I will attempt to do mine!

I turn first to Paul who wrestles mightily with the intersection of human freedom and love in his Letter to the Galatians. Here Gerhard Ebling hears Paul to be saying in echoes of Jesus’ own words in John that “Christian freedom is freedom to love and therefore *freedom to serve*. According to Paul, this is the Magna Charta of Christian ethics.” In fact for Paul, “***Freedom is freedom only as love, and love is love only as freedom***. To serve one another in love does not limit freedom. It is rather the unfolding and the fulfilling of freedom.” It is the freedom “to give ourselves in love to our neighbors even when they seem to stand very far away as our enemies.”

What do we know of this freedom and this love? As God is a God who loves us not out of necessity but freedom, I think first of the narrative that tells of God’s love for Israel, a love awash in pathos by the time Assyria destroys the Northern Kingdom in 722 B.C.E. From the infancy of God’s people, writes the prophet, God has called them out of slavery and into freedom, “But the more I called them,” Hosea hears God saying, “the more they went from me,” sacrificing to other gods and offering incense to idols. Nevertheless, God teaches them to walk

and takes them up in God's arms and heals them even though they do not know it is God keeping them in life. I find the image that follows to be so tender as to be almost unspeakable: "I led them with cords of human kindness, with bands of love. I was to them like those who lift infants to their cheeks. I bent down to them and fed them....How can I give you up, Ephraim? How can I hand you over, O Israel?"

Here is the love that never quits. Here in these words we know the love that is the complete vulnerability of the Creator toward the creature, the free and unconditional decision to pursue a relationship much like the parabolic shepherd that seeks the one lost sheep until it is found. Here is a love that necessarily grants the beloved perfect freedom; that does not coerce the other to love in return, because coercion would cease to be love. God is the lover who stands rather helplessly at the end of the road (to borrow another parable) waiting for the beloved to come to herself. You also could say that freedom as it is exercised as liberty by the beloved can only end badly. Idolatry usually ends this way. When we put our trust in someone or something or some cause that cannot bear the weight of human destiny, we find ourselves in what feels like the hand of fate, a fate that is usually a bondage of our own choosing. "Ephraim herds the wind...; they multiply falsehood and violence; they make a treaty with Assyria, and oil is carried to Egypt."

Still, the God who is love pursues us, seeks us until God finds us, helplessly waits for us to turn in freedom toward home. "***Freedom is freedom only as love, and love is love only as freedom.***" That is the heart of the matter. If such love is glimpsed by Israel in the words of the prophet Hosea, then we confess that the same love is made manifest to us in him who has loved us "while we were yet sinners" and has commanded us to love one another.

So in the second place, Paul cannot say what love is without saying Jesus. He knows only Christ can make unconditional lovers out of otherwise selfish human beings. He knows this because Christ has done this for him. Hence he offers no definition but instead turns us toward the one who alone is love. Substitute Christ for every mention made of love in this chapter and you begin to see through a mirror darkly the human face of love for which you were made. "What is here called love," writes Dietrich Bonhoeffer in his *Ethics*, "is not this general principle but the utterly unique event of the laying down of the life of Jesus Christ for us...The New Testament answers the question 'What is love?' quite unambiguously by pointing solely and entirely to Jesus Christ."

However when Paul considers the love revealed in Christ, he looks not to the teachings of Jesus or to the deeds of Jesus during his lifetime. He looks to the cross where "[Love] is shorthand for a narrative: death and resurrection..." says theologian Robert Jenson, "because, seen from faith's viewpoint, death and resurrection is what love concretely means....The usual promises we make each other stop short because we except the condition of death, because we reserve self-preservation; but to promise *myself* is to try to give up this reservation. Therefore to love is to accept death: it is to give up my cautious claims to hang onto myself...."

At the heart of the division in the Corinthian community, at the heart of the division within our nation, and especially at the heart of the divisions within Christ's church is this cautious claim to hang on to the self: the wise self, the moral self, the righteous self, the secure self, the "I am right and everyone else is wrong" self, the "I've got it and you can't have it" self. Therefore, with the exception of Paul's first two positive words (love is patient—has the longer wind; and kind—a better translation would be "fit"), we are given a negative litany that nails the various ways in which we hang on to ourselves, the reason at the end of the day why selfishness wins: by our *jealousy, boastfulness, arrogance, our rude* behavior; by *insisting on our own way*,

being *irritable and resentful, rejoicing in the wrong rather than in the truth*. We are so full of ourselves that we come to believe our love of the other exists only at the expense of ourselves. Indeed it must!

In fact, Paul would say death is the only condition for love; say that our jealous, boastful, arrogant and rude selves must die as Saul died on the road to Damascus. Our selves so sure we are right in our knowledge of God must give way to the God who takes us by surprise on the way to the grave. The persons we think we are because of our cautious hold on all that we possess must be denied if we are ever to find the lives we have been destined in love to live. Our selves full of ourselves must be emptied even as Christ emptied himself and took the form of a servant. This is not a condition we can reproduce by willing ourselves into it. Rather if we love at all, we love because--when we were jealous and boastful, arrogant and rude, irritable and resentful and insisting upon our own way--God first loved us, is *still* loving our sorry selves to the end that we may all, one day, behold love together face to face!

Until that day and in the midst of a nation and a people hell-bent on pursuing life, liberty and happiness at the literal expense of the commonweal, how is the church to bear witness to the freedom that is freedom only as love and the love that is love only as freedom? It is not insignificant that Paul speaks of the fruit of the Spirit in contrast to the works of the flesh: one a gift and the other a dubious human accomplishment. If it is the church we mean to be when we come together and are sent out, then we are the church only as we find ourselves called out of our individual human existence by the same God who brought God's people out of bondage and drew them into a future, called out by him who said, "Follow me." Then "What is given" says Charles Cousar "becomes also 'an unsuspected adventure,' a movement beyond security, comfort, and protection to the risks of love and the demands of service." By the way, according to an incredible Op-Ed in today's New York Times written by a psychologist and a professor of business administration, it turns out that happiness pursued becomes happiness received only as we give ourselves and what we possess away to others. *Research* says we are hard-wired not for selfishness but for sharing? But for Paul's initial readers [and for his readers late in time], living at the intersection of love and freedom has to do very down-to-earth realities like "overcoming community strife, nurturing gifts of patience, gentleness, and self control, bearing one another's burdens."

I spent far too much time these past few days watching the live feed on the internet from the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). To tell you the truth, it was hard to distinguish us from the rest of the selfish herd that jostles and snuffles at the great trough of life. I do not doubt that the Spirit was present and overflowing with the fruit that is love. I simply know, within my own sin-sick soul, that for all of the stands taken, the resolutions passed, the opportunities missed, selfishness mostly won. Paul, even now, would be penning a letter of admonishment about our biting and devouring and consuming one another.

The only hope we have is in him who commands us to love one another. For in him we have been given the love and the life and the freedom he commands of us, to the end that, by his grace alone, we might bear fruit—the fruit of the Spirit that is love made manifest in joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness and self control. Until the Supreme Court or the General Assembly rules otherwise, there is no law against loving one another as God in Christ has loved us. Thanks be to God.