

“The Art of Love: Relationships Are Matters of the Heart”

October 19, 2014

Extravagant Generosity series

Do you like Country music? I’ve heard people call it “somebody-done-somebody-wrong songs.” Maybe you’ve heard the joke that if you play a country song backwards you get back your truck, your dog, your job, and your spouse. But the love for country music says something. Perhaps it’s popular in our culture because the lyrics acknowledge our difficulties with relationships, but they also speak from the cynical or negative aspects of our culture.

In his letter to the Philippians, chapter 4, Paul encourages the readers to think on things that are true, noble, right, pure, lovely, admirable, and praiseworthy. But our cynical culture makes it hard to focus on these things. Sometimes, even in the church we struggle to shift focus from the cynical and negative. My prayer for us is that our journey to consider matters of the heart helps us to follow Paul’s lead.

Remember that Extravagant Generosity is giving that exceeds all expectations and extends to unexpected measures. God’s love for us is where it begins. Generosity flows from the heart – first from God’s heart to us and then from our hearts to the world. I heard this statement in a commercial this week: Every act of care we give helps the people we love become the people who love.

From the great Shema of the Torah in Deuteronomy to the teaching of Jesus, this focus on loving relationships is at the root of the scriptural values of our faith. Hear the words of Deuteronomy 6 again from *The Message*: “*Attention, Israel! God, our God! God the one and only! Love God, your God, with your whole heart: love him with all that's in you, love him with all you've got! Write these commandments that I've given you today on your hearts. Get them inside of you and then get them inside your children.*”

In the Jewish tradition, this is known as the Shema - the Hebrew for that first word of this command: "Hear." As far back as the second century B.C., this has been the cornerstone of every Jew's faith. It is recited every morning and evening by pious Jews. It shows their faithfulness to the first of the Ten Commandments: “You shall have no other gods before me.” The Shema also calls the people to proclaim the truth of God whether they’re “at home” (in Israel) or “away,” dispersed in some strange, alien land.

And the call to make faith visible is real – to carry the Word of God and to write it on the doorposts. Some Jewish traditions still wear small leather boxes as reminders of faith - one box bound to the arm and hand, while the other tied to the forehead. Both boxes contain parchments inscribed with the scriptural passages and are worn every day when the morning service is prayed as visible, everyday symbols of faith which are passed on from generation to generation.

For centuries, some Jewish homes have been recognizable from the outside by the presence of a mezuzah - a small container which is attached to the upper part of the doorway into a Jewish home. Rolled up inside it is a scroll inscribed with words from Deuteronomy on one side, and the single words Shaddai (Almighty) on the other. This mezzuzah functions like a display sign on a business, proclaiming to those outside that the people inside of that home seek to live lives committed to upholding the Torah.

In the Christian faith, we hear the Shema from the teaching of Jesus. One of the ways we express our love for God is through our love for one another. This is a clear expectation of our faith, but it's an understatement to say that we find it difficult sometimes.

Jesus recites the Shema when he's asked about the greatest commandment. He includes words from Leviticus 19, too: "Do not seek revenge or bear a grudge against one of your people, but love your neighbor as yourself. I am the LORD."

Jesus commands love because love is made real through deeds, not just words. Jesus brings us back to the Shema and tells us to listen up. These are not words just to memorize, but words to literally live. It is total commitment – heart, soul, mind, and strength. It is love that moves us to do and act – not just to feel. Love in action is the reality of Jesus' crucifixion.

As we consider Extravagant Generosity in the church, Bishop Robert Schnase says it's a fundamental activity because we ourselves have been recipients of Extravagant Generosity. He says, "Every sanctuary and chapel in which we have worshiped, every church organ or piano that has lifted our spirits, every chair where we have sat, every Communion table where we have come, every hymnal from which we have sung, every choir and praise band that has touched our hearts, every church classroom where we have gathered with our friends, every church kitchen that has prepared our meals, every church van that has taken us to camp, every church camp cabin where we have slept—all are the fruit of someone's Extravagant Generosity.

We have been the recipients of grace upon grace. We are the heirs, the beneficiaries of those who came before us who were touched by the generosity of Christ enough to give graciously so that we could experience the truth of Christ for ourselves. We owe the same to generations to come. We have worshiped in sanctuaries that we did not build, so to us falls the privilege of building sanctuaries where we shall never worship."

These are powerful words as I think about people – many of whom I never met – who have given their time and resources that have affected my spiritual life. I've worshipped in many churches over 38 years where people have supported ministry and mission. I've gone to church camp many summers – blessed with scholarship money from my home church and the labor of people who have given sweat to maintain the camp. I was blessed by campus ministry at Grand Valley. I received financial help to attend seminary from a couple who supported Garrett-Evangelical with their gifts.

This is how we learn to love as God calls us to do. A pastor writes, “There are times in my own journey of faith when being called to love--genuinely love--I feel rather clueless...What do I know about love? Not much, only that which I have experienced through my grandparents, my parents, my family and friends and my community of faith. It's as if I am constantly reminded...that God sends other people from the community to remind us not only that we are loved, but are called out of ourselves to love.” I hope you heard that in Jeanne’s and Roger’s reflections today.

Friends, Extravagant Generosity is personal – when we consider people who have given time, talent, and resources for us, we’re driven to do the same for others so that they might know the depths of God’s love, too – not that we would get credit, but that we could give God glory.

Our relationships with each other prove that we know God. We love and serve a God who is relational. We wouldn’t and couldn’t know God without a relationship with Jesus Christ. So we celebrate people who have extended Christ’s love to us - people who have helped us understand that we can trust in God’s unconditional love and grace. That kind of generosity - extravagant generosity - makes a difference. And we have that opportunity to show it just like people have done for us. Praise God!

There are many people who have touched your life in this congregation and in other Christian circles. Today you can take a “heart card” to celebrate people you love in the church and express your gratitude to God because those folks are gifts of God’s grace to you.

Thanks be to God. Amen.