

Better Medicine

Co-missioners,

Does the church you attend or tune into these days follow the three-year lectionary? If so, you'll hear a lot about love over the next couple of Sundays. That's because 1 John is the featured epistle for the current Easter season. Love—*agape* in Greek—is John's big word.

It's a fraught word too. So argues Matt Metevelis in today's offering. He sent it to us unasked earlier this week. We quickly suspended other plans so we could get it to you immediately. We imagine a lot of pulpit-talk over the next several days that will tout love without touting its source. Matt's musings are an antidote to that, and a reminder to us all to keep pushing Christ. Or remembering him, for that matter.

A thought of our own: The "perfect love" that "casts out fear" (1 John 4:18) is not ours for each other, but Christ's for us all. Enjoy!

Peace and Joy,
The Crossings Community

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A Preacher's Plea for the Gospel

by Matthew Metevelis



The church circles I run in always seem to think that it's important to preach love over faith. It's a way to correct what they see as the biggest problem in the church. The problem—so say some preachers and a lot of "edgy" ex-evangelicals that my colleagues swoon over—is that the church is too fussy about doctrine. The church should just be about teaching people to love. Once people learn to love then social problems will be fixed, churches will grow, and being Christian will be vindicated in the eyes of the world.

I'll leave aside the fact that rarely if ever have I been to a church that has been fussy about the dual nature of Christ or the divinity of the Holy Spirit or any other doctrinal matter. But the accuracy of the above diagnosis is a critique for another day. My main issue is with the medicine prescribed.



The problem with this preaching is that it not only gives short shrift to faith but also fails to demonstrate to people what love is. Above all, it misses the point that while love is powerful it is also deadly. Love, one might say, is radioactive material. Sure, it

motivates, enriches, and inspires us. It bonds communities together. Yet every love that binds a couple can also spark jealousy and resentment. It is certain at some point to inflict wounds of loss and grief. For every community that comes together to help their neighbors in the wake of a storm there is another community that bonds in dark corners on the internet or even on city streets to express their love for each other by hating people outside the group. Love in our hands is almost too powerful to bear. We can't handle it. For all the schmaltz of the Twilight books they were onto something. Cue Nazareth too. Love hurts. Love means regrets, pains, guilt, and suffering. Love means wounds. Even God can't bear love unscathed. Ask Jesus about the wounds in his hands and feet that were inflicted because he loved petty and vengeful mortals like us way more than we deserved.

Love always comes with a cross attached. It's a pain we can't do without. It never leaves us unscathed. You preach at a place for ten years and you get to know your people and you see the wreckage of love in the faces of those assembled. The broken relationships, the griefs, the rejections—all these scream out at you all the time. Pastors ingest the fallout of broken love in the criticisms, fights, and anonymous letters they're bound to endure. (And boy do we pastors seek to be loved!) Preaching about a kind of love that either glosses over these bitter realities or attempts to fix them by our own efforts is

idealistic at best. At worst, it's callous. Love can't fix the problems it creates.

Melanchthon in his defense of the Augsburg Confession was uncompromising on this point:

"For there is no law that accuses us more, that does more to make the conscience enraged against the judgment of God, than this summary of the whole law, 'Love the Lord your God with all your heart.' For who among the saints other than Christ can boast of having satisfied this law? Therefore the virtue of the law does not justify. But that virtue justifies, which receives the reconciliation given on account of Christ. That virtue is faith" (Apology IV.227-229, KW: 154).

According to Melanchthon love is not only the law but the most damning and accusatory part of the law. This is no doubt why Jesus told the rich young man that he hadn't kept the law fully until he sold all he had. "All your heart" is a very large price tag. But the fact is that people are crucifying themselves every day because they are pouring their hearts into their relationships, their jobs, and their causes. You can't fulfill any law until you pay a price. Sermons which rest on preaching love only raise the cost by putting a pious surcharge on it. As a chaplain I constantly have people rejecting a conversation with me because they don't need church. "I'm a good person," they tell me. "I love enough," I hear them saying.

Here's what I want to tell my colleagues:

If you assume your job is to preach people into a better or a more radical kind of love you will run into problems. It will lead to worse problems if you think your job is to teach people to love the right things. Your job instead is to walk into places where love has melted down and where fear claws at the edges of love like slow radioactive decay. Some of these places

have been sublimated in your hearers like a past trauma. Others have been covered over by the cheap guilt-relief strategies of a consumerist society that says you're part of the right solution if you buy the right books or pay an extra three bucks for coffee. As a preacher you walk in with a Geiger counter to reveal these places.

Once you've found these places you have medicines to apply that Christ has given you. You get to apply them. Where there are broken relationships, you preach forgiveness. Where there are people that suffer because of injustice or indifference, you



preach a God so intricately and intimately involved with these hearers that they won't feel driven to find God acting on their behalf anywhere else outside your doors. Where there is grief, you preach that day when tears will be wiped away. Where there is the gnawing sense that people haven't loved enough or haven't lived lives of purpose up to their "potential," you preach that there is love and accomplishment enough from that tree on Calvary spilling over into the altar they're about to eat from. That food is holy iodine after all the fallout attached to you in the previous week.

Faith is your medicine. If you dispense it correctly, we call this "preaching the gospel." Faith is not the work of getting doctrine correct or imagining that you have uncovered the secret of reality. Faith means that in the stormy sea of human living, loving, and suffering you have something to hang onto. A trust that things will work out. A verdict about your own successes and failures of loving that comes out not in your condemnation or favor but in the strength of all that Christ did and suffered for you. Preaching that tells you simply to kick harder will not

stop you from drowning. Preaching that tells you to hold on because your rescue is coming will inspire a love in you greater than anything you can muster by your own efforts.

We call that love "faith."