

# The Inexorable Love of God ©

A sermon based on John 13:31-35 and Acts 11:1-18

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Rabbi Daniel Liben tells a story of what happens when the first Jewish woman is elected President of the United States. The first thing she does is call her mother: "Mama, I've won the election; you've got to come to the swearing-in ceremony."

"I don't know, what will I wear?" says her mother.

"Don't worry," says the president elect, "I'll send you a wonderful dress maker."

"But how will I get there?"

"I'll send an aeroplane for you."

"Ehh, but its such a schlep to the airport."

"Mama, I'll send a limousine to take you to the airport."

"And, what will I do when I get to Washington?"

"There'll be a helicopter waiting, and after the ceremony you'll come with me to a wonderful dinner party."

"But you know I only eat kosher."

"I'll make sure the food for you is kosher. Just come, Mama."

"Okay, okay, if it makes you happy."

Well, the great day arrives and Mama, beautifully dressed, is seated between two supreme court justices, and as the inaugural ceremony unfolds she nudges the eminent gentleman on her right and says, "You see that girl, the one with her hand on the Bible, her brother's a doctor!"

## The Command to Love One Another

The biblical command to love one another is a simple command, but the carrying out of that command can become quite complicated, even within families. There are many opportunities for slights and emotional injury even within the most loving of families. We may feel like the young child who prayed, "Dear God: I bet it is very hard for you to love all the people in the world. There are only four people in our family and I can never do it."

Jesus said to his disciples, "I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another." (John 13:34-35) Sounds simple enough, but the command was shared with the disciples right after Judas left the group (13:30). It's also bundled with some additional news--news of Jesus'

imminent departure, and although reassurances come later (14:28-31) the second announcement was very troubling to the disciples. (13:36-38)

The "new commandment" Jesus left with us is a beautiful commandment, if only we didn't have to put it into practice. That's when it gets complicated. And perhaps some of us, to avoid such emotional and relational entanglements, try to maintain a picture of a perfect Jesus, a Jesus who lived perfectly, loved perfectly, preached perfectly, died perfectly, and who, in reality, leaves our lives and our relationships perfectly alone!

A colleague tells of a funeral at which he officiated that made him quite uncomfortable. A elderly woman died, and when the minister met with her five grown sons he asked about her life story, partly because it would help him make the funeral service more personal, but also because this work of remembering together is an important part of the grieving and healing process. He asked her five sons, "Who was she? In what did she find satisfaction, joy, fulfillment? How would you describe her?" Granted that these men were not professional talkers, but among the five of them they couldn't summon one recollection. Says the minister, "I could've run through the whole catalogue of traditional Christian virtues and they would've said, yes, yes, that's her. She was loving. She was joyful. She was peaceful. She was patient. She was kind. ...but they couldn't remember her. They didn't know her." (Wes Stanton) She was virtuous, but taken for granted, hardly noticed by the people who owed their very lives to her.

It's a sad story, but no sadder than what Christians do to Jesus in order to keep his gospel pristine and untried. Clarence Jordan, who tried to put the gospel of love into practice in the deeply segregated south in the 1940s, 50s and 60s, wrote, "Jesus has been so zealously worshipped, his deity so vehemently affirmed, his halo so brightly illumined, and his cross so beautifully polished, that in the minds of many he no longer exists as a man. He has become an exquisite celestial being who momentarily lapsed into a painful involvement in the human scene, and then quite properly returned to his heavenly habitat. By thus glorifying him we more effectively rid ourselves of him than did those who tried to do so by crudely crucifying him." (from a postcard sent to me by Lee Hazelton, when she and Phil visited Koinonia Farms in Georgia in 1984)

## **Love's Complications, Even in Apostolic Times**

The impulse to distance Jesus from the complications of our lives and relationships by putting him on a pedestal is alive and well in our own day, but it's also as old as the first century Docetists. It dates back to apostolic times, and it's one way of dealing with love's complications and the barriers to love. Another way is also revealed to us in apostolic times, in the book of Acts, when the gospel of love ran into its biggest complication ever! In our reading from the book of Acts we get our first hint of just how complicated the practice of this simple command is and was, even in apostolic times.

In our reading from Acts the Apostle Peter is called on the carpet because he's been fraternizing with the "uncircumcised," meaning non-Jews, meaning Gentiles. Chapter 10 tells the story of Cornelius, a Gentile--which was enough for Peter's friends to write him off--and a captain in the army--which would be enough for many Mennonites to write him off. Cornelius, however, was a devout man with a devout family, and he gave generously to those in need. (10:2) In short, he was a good and noble man, and when, through a series of circumstances Peter met him Peter could think of no good reason to withhold fellowship from him. ("I came without any objection," 10:29, TEV)

Peter's acceptance of Gentiles into fellowship, and allowing himself to be accepted into their fellowship, precipitated a crisis, however. Says one theologian, "This is the single most crucial crisis that the post-resurrection community would face, because its resolution would forever define the nature of the Christian community and the church." (Dennis Bratcher)

Peter was hardly back from visiting Cornelius when he was called on the carpet, and though the presenting issue was his failure to observe Old Testament dietary laws, the issue was, of course, much larger. In response, Peter tells, for the second time, the story of the vision that led him to meet with Cornelius. (10:9-16; 11:5-10) Peter explained it to them "step by step" (11:4), says John's Gospel. Peter had a vision in which a large sheet, filled with all manner of repulsive animals was presented to him, and Peter was invited to eat them. Peter, well versed in the dietary restrictions related to his faith, said, "By no means, Lord; for nothing profane or unclean has ever entered my mouth." (11:8) Whereupon a voice from heaven answered, "What God has made clean, you must not call profane." (11:9)

This interchange is repeated three times. (11:10) Following the vision Peter was invited to Cornelius' house, an invitation he accepted, but it was a move that shocked Peter's critics even more than potential dietary transgressions. In defence Peter answered, "The Spirit told me to go with them and not to make a distinction between them and us." (11:12) At the meeting itself Peter had told Cornelius and many of Cornelius' friends that had come to hear Peter, "I truly understand that God shows no partiality, but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him." (10:34-35)

Peter sounds quite sure of himself when he delivers that speech and in the subsequent explanation to his critics, but in the first telling of his vision we are told that Peter was "greatly puzzled about what to make of the vision...." (10:17) And rightly so! It may be difficult for us, far removed from the cultural context of the biblical world, to really catch the magnitude of what happened to Peter. The tendency is to interpret dietary restrictions and the myriad of other Pharisaic "do's" and "don'ts" in very legalistic terms, but there was far more at stake here than legal issues. The Old Testament dietary regulations, for example, were not just a matter of law. They were a matter of religious and communal identity that had been hammered out on the anvil of a harsh history! Three centuries before the birth of Jesus, the Greeks had taken control of Palestine after its conquest by Alexander. The military conquest was just the beginning; following fast upon its heels was Alexander's policy of hellenization, the forced adoption of Greek culture. Minority groups like the Jews felt immense pressure to conform to Greek laws, Greek customs, and Greek religion. Many Jews complied because the pressure was formidable, and the identity of Judaism was seriously weakened.

There were wise leaders in the Jewish community who understood the strategic importance of rituals in maintaining their religious heritage and identity. They remembered the Old Testament struggle that Ezra and Nehemiah had faced after the return from Babylonian exile, and how, when the Jewish community was in danger of losing its heritage and identity Nehemiah responded with a strict enforcement of religious and cultural laws as a means to define his people and to keep them distinguished from the pagan world in which they existed.

To understand this dynamic one has only to look at recent events, like the choice of Joe Lieberman as Al Gore's running mate in the last American presidential election. It's

not that long since the Jewish comedian, Sam Levinson, quipped that the first Jewish President would be an Episcopalian! Madeline Albright, notes one rabbi, refers fondly to her Jewish heritage, but she really is an Episcopalian. The difference with Lieberman, he says, is that Lieberman is not "...like most of the famous Americans we like to claim as our own, a marginal Jew who has compromised the tradition in order to pursue a secular path. No, this is an Ivy League educated guy who keeps Kosher at State dinners, and who walks to Shul every Shabbas. Hadassah, his wife, grew up in a Rabbinic family, the daughter of Holocaust survivors. Their daughter goes to day school, and Haddassah's son from her first marriage is studying to be a Rabbi ...for which, incidentally, he turned down Yale Law School." (Daniel H. Liben, "A New Year in America," Rosh HaShanah 5761)

It's very difficult to withstand pressures to conform. It's like a man named Cohen who went to court one day to change his name. "I want to change my name to O'Malley," he told the judge. "I just purchased a bar in an Irish neighbourhood, and I think it will be good for business."

"Mr. Cohen," replied the judge: "Who do you think you'll be fooling by changing your name to O'Malley? Surely you don't have to resort to such subterfuge."

"Judge, I've made up my mind." So the name was changed.

Two weeks later, Cohen was back in court, wanting to change his name again. "Ahh, Mr. Cohen," said the judge, "I see you've reconsidered. You want to do the sensible thing and reclaim your name."

"No," said Cohen, "I want to change it to O'Reilley."

"O'Reilley? If changing your name to O'Malley didn't improve your circumstances, why do you think changing your name to O'Reilley will work any better?"

"Judge, you don't understand. You see, when they ask me, 'What was your name before you changed it?' I want to be able to say it was O'Malley!"

It's an old joke, but it reflects a slice of reality in American Jewish life as well as Canadian Mennonite life. Forty to fifty years ago it was hard to get into Canadian broadcasting without an English name. I have only to think of Abe Driedger, a former OMC'r, who before the CBC television cameras became Ab Douglas. Likewise Sam Schellenberg, Lois Wimble's brother, became David Jones on radio and Ralph Friesen became Ralph Milton. There are tremendous pressures to blend into our culture, perhaps with some cost to our heritage and identity.

The situation in biblical times was far less subtle. Many Jews refused to be assimilated into Greek culture but in response the Greek leaders made a bold move to annihilate Judaism. In 167 BC the Greek ruler Antiochus Epiphanes IV essentially banned Judaism from Palestine, climaxing his cultural pillage by seizing the temple in Jerusalem and converting it into a shrine to Zeus and sacrificing a pig in the Holy of Holies! Then, to eliminate opposition, he sent his soldiers throughout the countryside, rounding up the inhabitants of villages and forcing them at the threat of death to eat pork! Many complied, but some refused and were killed! Finally, in one village a priest and his five sons not only refused to eat the pork, but rose up and killed the Greek soldiers. They then fled to the mountains and thus began the struggle against the Greeks that became known as the Maccabean Wars.

When Peter ate the "unclean" food with "unclean" people, it was nothing less than the total transformation of the shape and framework of his faith. God was asking him, to an even greater degree than Abraham, to leave a place of security and identity, and to launch out into uncharted areas with nothing other than God's Spirit to guide him. God was asking a lot! And Peter's critics had every right and responsibility to challenge him. From their perspective, Peter was abandoning their cherished faith. The commandment to love is a good one, a beautiful one, but it shouldn't include outsiders, should it?!?

Reinhold Niebuhr, an American theologian and student of the New Testament, wrote, "...the most stubborn evil in human life appears precisely at the point where the forces which make for community have been extended far enough to create large social aggregates which are not large enough to include the total human community and are yet powerful enough to dominate and destroy life beyond themselves." (An Interpretation of Christian Ethics, page 90)

The Jewish community in Peter's time may not have felt powerful, or destructive, but Peter realized that the "insider" mentality that had prevented Jews from disappearing into the eddies of history, was also keeping other children of God away from God. What nudged Peter toward this realization? The vision of the bed sheet filled with offensive animals certainly helped, but perhaps he also remembered Jesus' words, when Jesus told the Pharisees, "Listen and understand: it is not what goes into the mouth that defiles a person, but ...what comes out of the mouth that defiles." (Matthew 15:10-11) Perhaps he remembered Jesus' words concerning the Sabbath, that the "Sabbath was made for humankind, and not humankind for the Sabbath...." (Mark 2:27) Perhaps he remembered the way Jesus included traditional "outsiders" like women, lepers and Samaritans. Perhaps Peter sensed that a set of responses to the world that is appropriate and vital at one point in history may actually become a hindrance and destructive of the very reason we exist, at another point in history.

When Peter was called on the carpet by his critics, he explained to them that as he began to speak to the people gathered at Cornelius' house, "...the Holy Spirit fell upon them just as it had upon us at the beginning." (Acts 11:15) Peter's speech proved persuasive, for "when they heard this," says the Book of Acts, "they were silenced." (11:18) And thus Peter's experience in Acts, chapters 10 to 11, becomes the pivot around which turns not only the book, but the entire New Testament understanding of the Christian church.

## **Love's Inexorableness**

The practice of Jesus' commandment to love one another is often complicated, and there were still questions later on about the admission of Gentiles into fellowship--the terms on which they would be admitted, and whether they should first become Jewish in order to become Christians (Acts 15)--but Peter was convinced early on that a new work of God was afoot in the world, a new shape for God's people. His explanation to his critics suggests this, for he told them, "If then God gave them the same gift that he gave us when we believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I that I could hinder God?" (Acts 11:17) Or as the Jerusalem Bible phrases it, "...who was I to stand in God's way?"

I like the thought behind this phrase. The practice of Jesus' command to love one another may become complicated in practice, but there is something much bigger than our own humble efforts at play here. This text, in Acts, is permeated with the action of God. It is God who gives Peter the vision, a new way of looking at things. It is God who

works with Cornelius and his family, preparing them for Peter's visit. (Acts 10:3-6) And it is the gift of the Holy Spirit to the various groups of people that ties all of these events together. The Holy Spirit was leading Peter at every step; this is not so much an account of Peter deciding what to become as it is an account of what God was calling him to become, and Peter, in a rare show of insight, decides not to get in God's way! Peter rightly realizes that any attempt to stem the course of events unfolding is foolish.

God is at work. God's doing great things over at Cornelius' house! The purposes of God are unfolding, and it might be best to get with the program, so to speak. There is about the force of love, and the work of God's Holy Spirit, an inexorable quality. Acts reveals that repeated attempts to squelch apostolic activity were unsuccessful. God's purposes, ultimately, will not be thwarted. That isn't to say that we can't slow down or frustrate the Holy Spirit, and it doesn't lessen our responsibility to live and love like Jesus; indeed, it invites us to be partners in this wonderful experience. Thomas Merton described the nature of God's love positively when he likened it to a gravitational force that draws us, that attracts us. The love of God is not dominating or controlling, but rather a creative, liberating, and enabling power.

The human impulse, of course, is to protect love--to protect it by putting it up on a pedestal, untried. Love makes us vulnerable, and our tendency is to protect ourselves when our hearts are broken. C.S. Lewis wrote something to the effect that if we want to make sure of keeping love intact, we should give our heart to no one. "Avoid all entanglements," Lewis wrote. "Lock it up safe in (a) casket or coffin.... But in that casket-safe, dark, motionless, airless--it will change. It will not be broken; it will become unbreakable, impenetrable, irredeemable... The only place outside Heaven where you can be perfectly safe from all the dangers...of love is Hell." (C.S. Lewis, *The Four Loves*)

Love invites us on a journey, a journey with some uncertainties and dangers, but one that draws us, nonetheless. It drew in Peter's critics, for when they heard how the Holy Spirit had moved Peter to include the heretofore excluded, it not only "silenced" them; we read that they "praised God". (Acts 11:18) An amazing change of heart, for which we too praise God!

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All quotations of Scripture, unless otherwise noted, are from the New Revised Standard Version.