

“WHAT’S IT ALL ABOUT?”

I Corinthians 13

Maybe you remember, back in the 60’s, an obscure film (probably the producers didn’t think it was obscure) called “Alfie.” Remember that? Remember the theme song? “What’s it all about, Alfie?” That song was asking about life in general, but I think there’s no better time in the life of the church for us, now, than to take all the things that we struggle with and wrestle with, set them just for a minute to one side, and ask ourselves, what’s it all about? What is the one indispensable thing to our faith? What is it all about? Why do we gather week after week? Why is this church still in existence after 2,000 years? Actually we don’t have the right to be in existence, for some of the things we’ve done over these years.

The song has an answer. Part of it reads, “As sure as I believe there’s a heaven above, Alfie, I know there’s something much more — something even non-believers can believe in. I believe in love, Alfie. Without true love we just exist.” I’m not sure that the author of that song knew that they were paraphrasing I Corinthians 13, but they were. “Without love I am a clanging cymbal, a noisy gong” — all of that stuff that makes a lot of racket and we’d rather put our hands over our ears. And what is true of life turns out to be true of faith as well. The thing that transforms existence into life, the thing that makes the Word flesh, is love. Ask Torah, ask the prophets, ask Jesus — what is it all about? Love. How very wise and inclusive of God to make the core of faith something that even non-believers can believe in. From Genesis to Revelation that thread remains constant. Love may look very different in different contexts. It may not always be easy to tell what is the loving action and what is not in a given circumstance. But I think the Bible is very clear that love is the nature of God, and is therefore the root from which all righteousness springs. Love is why we were created, and love is why we have not been destroyed.

That can sound like a really lovely platitude. And as we read I Corinthians 13 and the story of the Good Samaritan we go through that so frequently that we’re prone to forget that we are no more adept at applying that teaching than the people of Israel that the prophets reprimanded or the Jewish leaders of Jesus’ day. We teach that the story of the Good Samaritan is told to answer the question, “Who is my neighbor?” and that the answer is, “Everybody, even your enemy.” Nothing wrong with that, and that is the question immediately preceding the parable. But the question that frames the entire passage is not “Who is my neighbor?” but “What must I do to inherit eternal life?” And the answer that Jesus gives is, “Love.” Love like the Samaritan loves. With all due respect to the Four Spiritual Laws and many of our past evangelistic efforts, that’s the only answer. Love. Love God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your strength, and your neighbor as yourself. Love, as it is lived out in acts of justice and mercy. Love that, lo and behold, can be performed by a Samaritan as well as by a Jew.

Have you ever really sat and thought about how scandalous that passage is, not only to the Jews of Jesus' day, but to us... now... here. Remember that the Samaritans were considered heretics by the Jews. They were the ones with the wrong doctrine, the wrong theology — the ones that mixed heathen practices with the worship of Yahweh and, according to Josephus, even dedicated the temple on Mt. Gerazim to Zeus. But Jesus makes the Samaritan the hero of the story, saying to all, "It's about love as it's seen in justice and mercy. It's not about pure doctrine." And it's the Samaritan that inherits eternal life, as those with the correct theology and who've kept themselves pure walk on by. "What must I do to inherit eternal life?" the lawyer asks. Lift up the fallen, care for the wounded, love your neighbor, period. We need to hear the scandal of that message again and again and again. Love is all that is asked of us. Love God, love your neighbor, love yourself. We need to examine ourselves and our churches and ask what happens and what takes precedence when love and doctrine collide? Or perhaps in our context, when love and the Discipline collide. What is it all about? It's all about love, from beginning to end. And just like most of God's people before us, we too have forgotten.

There's a wonderful story from the tradition of the desert fathers and mothers who flourished as hermits in the early centuries of the Christian church. The story is told that Abba Lot went to see Abba Joseph, and said to him, "Abba, as far as I can, I say my little office, I fast a little, I pray and I meditate, I live in peace, and as far as I can I purify my thoughts. What else can I do?" And the old man stood up, and he stretched his hands toward heaven. His fingers became like ten lamps of fire. And he said to him, "If you will, you can become all flame."

There isn't a lover on this earth who doesn't know that love is a fire. And it's not a controlled burn either, deciding "I'll burn here, and I won't burn over there." When somebody is completely in love it burns everywhere and it spills onto everything. For that reason, lovers are only fit to be with each other, because the rest of us are so tired of hearing about it. They become all flame. And I think that's what Abba Joseph was trying to say to Abba Lot. "It's nice that you have the spiritual disciplines down well, but the real goal of all of it is love." To become all flame in our love for God and for each other. To become the burning bush that will draw others to us to ask, "how can they burn and burn and yet not be consumed?" To be so completely loving that we don't think twice when we see the wounded by the side of the road. We don't think, "Will I be pure if I touch?" We simply go and bind the wounds and pour on wine and oil and take them to the inn. When we fail in that, we fail in everything.

I came to learn that lesson, as unfortunately I learned most of my lessons, the hard way. I was at work. It was my very first job, at the rare book library at Brown University. For about a week we had been seeing two workmen who were coming in and installing an alarm system in all the doors and windows. Towards the end of the week, Thursday to be exact, I started to get that feeling in the pit of my stomach which means either food poisoning or God is trying to say something to me. And I felt that what God was trying to say to me was that I should go to those two young men and to tell them that God loved them and that I loved them. My answer to God was instantaneous. I said, "No! That's crazy, God." I was newly married, 22 years old. I'm going to go up to two strange young men and say, "I love you?" I don't think so. And God and I had this conversation for most of the day, with God urging me on, and me saying, "No, God, you've had a lot of good ideas in your time, but this is not one of them." And I did things to occupy myself to get rid of the feeling. I succeeded, and at the end of the day I went home without having embarrassed myself. Friday morning I came into work and the staff was buzzing with the news. They said, "Did you hear? Did you see on the news?" I said, "No, what?" They said, "You know those guys who've been coming in all week putting in the alarm system? And you know the shorter one, the sandy-haired one? He never went home last night." He went directly to the Jamestown bridge. And leaving his car running, he got out and he jumped to his death. He left a note. Can you guess what it said? It said no one loved him.

People, can't we get it? Can't we manage to remember what it's really all about? While we argue about Discipline paragraphs, people are jumping off of bridges for lack of love. They're shooting others because hate rages in their hearts. Can't we get it? Can't we remember? Can't we find it in our hearts to love? Can't we work to become all flame? I think that's what our faith is supposed to be — a love affair in which we become so engrossed that we do become all flame. We forget so often. We get caught up in our controversies and our beliefs and we start to think and even teach that it's about doctrine. We're so worried about right belief that we've forgotten about love. God knew very early on that we would forget, which is why, when God first told us to become all flame, back in Deuteronomy 6 where God said, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your strength," God didn't just stop there. God went on with what, when you look at it, is a pretty weird set of instructions. God told us to put it everywhere. To say that message every morning when we wake up, every night when we go to bed, when we are at home, when we are away. "Write it," says God, "on your hand, on your forehead, on the doorpost of your house, and on your gates." I don't know of any other commandment that God made sure was plastered absolutely everywhere, knowing that that was the one thing we had to get and the one thing that we were so likely to forget. And we did forget. We forget even now. And the world is jumping off bridges and shooting up schools while we sit, embarrassed, in our pews. Is it any wonder that people stay away in droves?

If we could only remember that. If we could only focus on becoming all flame, consumed with the love of God and one another, in the way that a lover is with the beloved. If we could get to that point then we can come back and see if anybody still has an interest in refining our doctrine, our polity, and our theology. I doubt at that point if anybody would care about the issues that currently divide us. I think our concerns would be very, very different. I think we would stop worrying about who our ministers were blessing and start worrying about who they were cursing. I think we'd stop worrying about who people were loving and start worrying about who they were hating. I think we'd be so completely consumed in being all flame, fanned by the rushing wind of the Spirit of God, that our only concern would be spreading the fire. Christianity was never meant to be a controlled burn. It was meant to be a wildfire.

Square one in the Christian faith and in all of life is love. If you've missed it, you've got to go back. Do not pass Go, do not collect \$200, go back and start over. "If I speak with the tongues of mortals and of angels but have not love, I am a noisy gong or clanging cymbal. And if I have prophetic powers and understand all mysteries and all knowledge and if I have all faith so that I can remove mountains but do not have love, I... am... nothing. If I give away all my possessions and if I hand over my body to be burned but do not have love, I... gain... nothing. Zip. Nada. Zero. Nothing. It's not about whether our theology is correct or whether our doctrine is pure. It's not even about the United Methodist Discipline. It's about whether the love of God burns hot in your breast. Love is greater than hope. Love is even greater than faith, says Paul. How many times have you really heard that last verse? Love is greater than faith. That's what it's all about, Alfie.

Jesus was love incarnate. The love of God that had previously been expressed in word, finally made flesh. The truth for Christians, Jews, and Muslims alike is that it's all about love. That was established by the end of Deuteronomy, which all three of those faiths worship. When people ask us, how do we know what that means, the answer we give as Christians is Jesus. Jesus is the revelation of God. God revealed, which means love revealed. And to know what it means to love, we look at Jesus. Jesus did not spend his time on earth in a love-sick swoon. His love moved him to acts of compassion, to healings, to exorcisms, to feeding the hungry, to providing wine, to raising the dead. His love sometimes moved him to forceful acts, running wild through the temple, swinging a whip and turning tables of the money changers, or speaking out harshly against the hypocrisy and injustice of the religious leaders. Sometimes God's love moved him to violate Jewish discipline, working on the Sabbath, refusing to stone an adulteress, talking publicly with women at wells, and portraying a heretic Samaritan as inheriting eternal life before the priest and the Levite. And finally his love showed us what every good love story has always told us, that love is willing to endure pain and even death for the sake of the beloved.

They came to Jesus and they asked, "What must I do to inherit eternal life?" "Love," said Jesus.

Abba Lot went to see Abba Joseph and said to him, "Abba, as far as I can I say my little office, I fast a little, I pray and I meditate, I live in peace, and as far as I can I purify my thoughts. What else can I do?" And the old man stood up, and he stretched his hands toward the heavens, and his fingers became like ten lamps of fire, and he said to him, "If you will, you can become all flame."

Shine, Jesus, shine, fill this land with the Father's glory.
Blaze, Spirit, blaze, set our hearts on fire.
Flow, river, flow, flood the nations with grace and mercy.
Send forth your word, Lord, and let there be light.

Amen

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