

The Grunt Work of Love

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September 10, 2017

Romans 13:8-14; Matthew 18:15-20

Recently, I was talking with a member of our church who has been married sixty-five years.

In both admiration and awe, I asked what it took for a marriage to survive and thrive that long.

“A lot of hard work,” she told me. “Anybody who’s been married any length of time and tells you they’ve never had a cross word is either lying or somebody’s a wimp!”

Her observation brought to mind another couple I knew down in Macon, Georgia: James and Miriam Trammell. When James and Miriam decided to marry shortly after the Second World War, they went to see the pastor.

At the time, the wife’s vows included the words, “love, honor, and *obey*.” Miriam chaffed at that word “obey,” suggesting they substitute the word “cherish” instead.

During the ceremony, the minister fought to suppress a smile when he came to that vow. But Miriam, a gutsy southern gal, was having none of that “obey business.”

Years later, husband James told me with a wry grin, “And I’ve been having trouble with her ever since.”

The truth is, being part of an authentic, growing relationship is a daunting challenge. Romantic flights of fancy cannot sustain such a relationship. No, that kind of relationship requires people willing to embrace the grunt work of love.

Both our New Testament and Gospel lessons unpack the meaning of such a moral, committed love. Paul says we should owe nothing to anybody, save to love one another.

And Jesus says, "If you have a knotty problem with someone close to you, here's what to do."

Paul paints with broad strokes, and Jesus with a finer brush. Let's take a moment to ponder the truth each left us.

Paul writes that the one who loves another has fulfilled the law. According to rabbinic tradition, the Law of Moses contained 613 rules and regulations. But Paul, like Jesus before him, argues that all that commentary can be boiled down to two essential truths: love God and love your neighbor. In other words, any love that hopes to stand tall and journey long needs two feet: the love of God and the love of neighbor, walking in stride together.

But please note: Paul says love *fulfills* the law, not that love *replaces* the law. Because the love in view here is not a self-serving love that says, "We'll stay together as long as we find each other mutually delectable!"

No, he's talking about a principled love that toughs it out in the hard times. After all, the examples Paul gives are all drawn from the second table of the Ten Commandments, those timeless truths that define our obligations, under God, to one another: "You shall not commit adultery; you shall not murder; you shall not steal; you shall not bear false witness; you shall not covet."

That's what it means in Paul's words to "do no wrong to a neighbor." *That's* what it means to love with the moral grit and teeth and daring required to "fulfill the law."

Tony Campolo tells the story of his friend, Ed Barkley. Ed was on a train leaving London's Victoria Station when the man in the seat across from him had a terrible seizure.

The man fell to the floor and his traveling companion knelt beside him, put his coat under the convulsing man's head, and cradled him until he became calm again. Seeing Barkley looking on in shock, the helper told this story.

"Mister, this happens two or three times a day without warning. That's why I stay with him all the time. You see, we were buddies in Vietnam. One day, I got shot up pretty bad. We were deep in the jungle

and the helicopter never came. My friend here put me on his back and carried me through the jungle for three days, snipers shooting at us all the way. Finally, he got me to safety.”

“So four years ago, when I heard about his condition, I pulled up stakes and came here to be with him. Sure, it's hard sometimes, but Mister, after what he did for me, there ain't nothing I wouldn't do for him.”

Someday, maybe someday soon, you're going to need to love someone you care about in a way that isn't easy: Like cutting the gnarled toe nails of your loved one in the nursing home; or seeing your tortured adolescent through a bewildering phase when no one understands him or her, especially him or herself; or standing by your partner and trying to work through your differences when it would be so much easier just to cut and run.

When love faces such a test, a feeling-based love won't cut it. No, that's when only a committed love will do. A love that asks first, not “What's in it for me?” but “what can I do to help?” A love that looks a lot less like *my kind* of love and a lot more like the love . . . of Jesus.

While Paul points to the grunt work of love, Jesus gets down to the nitty gritty. He offers a specific model for intervention when trouble is brewing. Like Paul, Jesus takes it for granted that struggle and conflict will be part of any serious relationship. Indeed, what makes a relationship Christian is not the absence of conflict but how conflicts are managed and hopefully, resolved.

Interestingly, Jesus puts the responsibility for broaching a painful subject on the one who is injured. There is no room here for a victim mentality that leaves us to lick our wounds and seethe in bitterness. Rather, we are to talk *with* the person we feel has wronged us, rather than talk *about* them.

“Speak privately to the person,” says Jesus. “If they are of a mind to listen and make amends, problem solved.”

“But if the two of you can't work it out,” he continues, “get some help. Find yourself a friend, mediator, or professional counselor who can help you two really hear what the other person is saying. Often a healthy dose of skilled, attentive listening is enough to resolve an impasse.”

But this is not Jesus' first rodeo. He knows when hurts and wounds run deep, and sometimes a trip to the relationship ICU may be needed: “If you still can't work out your differences, take the matter to

the church.” Meaning not a sanctuary full of folk on Sunday morning, but the small house church that was the norm in Matthew’s day: something more like a Sunday School class or friendship circle in our experience.

“Invite some folks you trust to make this a matter of discernment and prayer. Give tempers some time to cool, ask God’s help, and then try again.”

“But if after all these good faith efforts, the other party refuses to be reconciled, let ‘em be. Maybe in time they’ll come around; maybe not. But at least you will have done all you can do.”

Perhaps you’ve heard about the pastor and minister of music who had a very public spat. Eventually, this dispute began to spill over into the church’s worship services.

One Sunday, the pastor preached on the need for commitment. The music director selected as the final hymn, "I Shall Not Be Moved."

The next week, the pastor preached on tithing and the need to generously support the work of the church. In response, the minister of music led the hymn, "Jesus Paid It All."

The next week, the pastor preached on gossip and the need to rein in wagging tongues. As the grand finale that Sunday, the music director led the hymn, "I Love to Tell the Story."

As tensions grew, the pastor told the congregation he was considering resigning. The minister of music’s final selection that Sunday? "Oh Why Not Tonight?"

Eventually, the pastor did resign, announcing defiantly it was *Jesus* who brought him there, and it was *Jesus* who was leading him away. Whereupon the minister of music led the congregation in a rousing chorus of "What a Friend We Have in Jesus."

Fortunately, Ken Wilson and I have never had a public spat or even a serious private one. Whatever differences of opinion have occurred, we have sorted out between us. That’s one reason Ken Wilson has worked so effectively, not just with me, but with my predecessors at Knollwood for the last three decades. It’s not just because he’s a good minister of music; it’s because he’s a good man.

Ken is principled and honest and trustworthy and true. I’ve never had a colleague in ministry I liked, respected, or trusted more.

Further, Ken has invested for the long haul. If anybody has done the grunt work of love, it is Ken. A beloved mentor told him years ago, "It's easy to have a great youth choir. Just start when they're three."

That's why most Sunday mornings since 1986, Ken has pulled out his guitar and taught our preschoolers and children to sing.

No, we need not look far for Exhibit A of what both Jesus and Paul are talking about: loving our neighbors and working through our differences. We know it can be done because for the better part of three decades, we've seen Ken Wilson do it within and on behalf of this family of faith.

So yes, it saddens me that you have received--or soon will receive--a letter announcing Ken's retirement in February. But what a blessing we have received in his ministry, including an unforgettable life lesson in what a faithful, committed love looks like and lives like.

And so we come to our Lord's Table this day, seeking Jesus' strength and courage to try again. Maybe with his help, we can reinvest in a relationship that is floundering. Maybe in his grace, we can dare to face that person, that partner, that problem that has haunted us for so long.

Because thankfully, Jesus doesn't demand success. All he asks is that we be willing to take a chance on him and on one another as we learn in his company what it means to "love one another" as we have been loved by God.

O holy Christ, thank you for the fresh beginning the table of your grace always provides. Now, fortified by your strength, help us to love one another as you have loved us. Amen.

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