

Clarity

May 19, 2019

I want to speak to you today, briefly—and I do promise to be brief—about clarity. Our gospel is about as clear as it gets: Love one another as I have loved you. Say it with me, please: “Love one another as I have loved you.”

Why is this so hard?

Some of you know that I’ve recently published a book, a biography of a man by the name of Fethullah Gülen. He’s a Turkish preacher, a faithful Muslim, and a man of peace—kind of an Islamic Martin Luther King, Jr./Mahatma Gandhi hybrid.

In his most accessible book, “Toward a Global Civilization of Love and Tolerance,” Gülen writes, in his very first sentences:

“Love is the most essential element of every being, and it is the most radiant light, and it is the greatest power; able to resist and overcome all else.”

Love as God loves us is a power—the power of creation itself, and the power of spring.

So let’s attain a first point of clarity: Love is power. Say that with me, too: “Love is power.” When we say we will love someone as God loves us, it means we empower them—we give them power, we want them to exercise their power to the utmost.

It’s because power has become a dirty word, tainted with the violence of force, that we don’t see love as the power that it is: “as the most radiant light, able to resist and overcome all else,” as Gülen puts it.

So, where do we see this love around us, you might ask? If love is so powerful, why is our political life so screwed up?

Love is the power of springtime; the clarity of the greening power happening all around us. In Latin, which is where the word clarity comes from (from *claritas*), the qualities of transparency, coherence, and lucidity, which are synonyms for clarity, are properly used to point to God. So clarity isn’t just understanding or something internal or subjective: clarity, properly is divine glory—the glory of spring.

We’re fortunate here in Wisconsin to experience vividly the changing of the seasons, and the kind of power that each contains.

Winter’s ice, summer’s heat, fall’s colors—each of those is a kind of power, right? Each season finally comes—and nothing can stop it; there’s a power there able to resist and overcome all else, like love.

But it is spring—the rain and the gradually warming air that points us clearly to the power of love to resurrect even the deadest among us.

It's an analogy, and no analogy is perfect. But if you want to understand resurrection; if you want to understand Easter, the season we are still in; if you want to understand love's power, consider a single growing plant.

Some of you know that I like to garden. I plant all kinds of things, but what I especially like to grow in tiny little seed pots that I start in March is basil. And I love it when those tiny little basil seeds, that this year my grandson Jaxon and I planted, begin to peek their way up out of the soil, seeking the light that will strengthen them and sustain them.

I then water those little babies carefully, thinning out the seedlings, and dropping sometimes single droplets of water at the base of the emerging plant. Such tenderness is power—make no mistake. Such love is power, power that will eventually produce a big bushing plant that when I cut off its branching limbs, and grind up the leaves, and add a little garlic, and olive oil, and pine nuts, will give me pesto that I can freeze throughout the winter, thaw, and then enjoy with a little pasta and maybe a glass of red wine. A single plant can give us joy throughout the year, even after it is no longer alive.

When we are clear about love's power, the most simple thing—a single plant—can reveal God's glory.

Which is why being a Sunday School teacher is such a noble and rewarding way to participate in the life of this church. It's one of the greatest gifts a person can give to a child—loving attention that engages head and heart at the same time. And that's what our faith formation here at Union is all about; helping to educate and form people who understand clearly that Christianity means: “love one another as I have loved you.” Say it with me, clearly: “love one another as I have loved you.”

And this is why I enjoy so much the vision of revelation in our first reading today; the vision of a new heaven and a new earth. It's one of my favorite passages in Scripture. This is not a historical prediction of what is going to happen in the future; it's a God-driven change in HOW we see things right now: love does that. When God dwells among us, whatever is broken in our lives, love can put back together. When God dwells among us, whatever is death-dealing in our lives, love can redeem. When God dwells among us, whatever is uncertain in our lives, love can clarify.

Why is this so hard?

Fethullah Gülen understands that love encounters obstacles. He has repeatedly encountered obstacles in his life. He's been imprisoned, had to go on the run for six years, and now is slandered as a terrorist—because he preaches the power of love.

And yet he has maintained clarity on one thing: God is love, and we can love one another, because God loves us. The sentence I'm having you repeat with me, following Jesus, is not just an imperative—a command—love one another, as God loves us. It's also a statement of fact and possibility: we CAN love one another, because God loves us.

And when we put it that way, the reason it is so hard becomes clear. Our ego gets in the way. Our greed gets in the way. Our desire to hang on to those enemies who help to define “us” versus “them” gets in the way.

Now, one of the most misunderstood words in the public discussion about Muslims and Islam is the word jihad. You probably have heard it referred to as “holy war,” and that is one of its meanings. Jihad is the defensive—and that’s important—effort to prevent an occupying army from taking over your land. It must be declared by an authorized government, and it cannot be undertaken by an individual. And such military jihad is what orthodox Muslim theologians like Gulen call the LESSER jihad; the lesser struggle, which is what the word means: literally, to struggle.

But the greater jihad, the greater struggle of every Muslim—and, I would say, the greatest struggle of every Christian—is to overcome one’s ego; to get out of God’s way and to let love prevail. Because love is power. And God’s way of love created this world, and renews it with each season, because in Jesus, God came to dwell among us, demonstrating love and its resurrection power.

And love brings clarity: of purpose

Love brings Clarity: of calling

Love brings Clarity: of compassion

Love brings Clarity: of courage

Love brings Clarity: of understanding

Love brings Clarity: of commitment

So, let’s be clear: love one another, as I have loved you. Say it with me one more time: “love one another, as I have loved you.” Amen.

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