

Be What You Admire

June 18, 2017

Several weeks ago I received a Facebook article from one of my sisters. It told the story of a young girl who went to her mom not sure of what she should do because she had a crush who didn't seem to be interested in her.

It seemed like a setup to me. I mean what little girl goes to her mom with that question? Nonetheless, despite it being contrived, the article held some wisdom.

The story goes that the mother's response to her daughter was to pull the family Bible off the shelf. As they sat down together, the mom opened the Bible to 1 Corinthians 13 and then instructed her daughter to read that famous treatise on love, but to insert her crush's name every time the Bible said the word love particularly in verses four through seven. So the little girl read out loud:

“Jacob is patient; Jacob is kind; Jacob is not envious, or boastful, or arrogant, or rude. Jacob does not insist on his own way; Jacob is not irritable or resentful; he does not rejoice in wrongdoing but rejoices in the truth. Jacob bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.”

The daughter paused as she was reading and said: “But that's not really true. Jacob isn't patient. He gets really mad if anybody bumps him in the hallway, and he's not usually all that kind. He laughs at people when they give the wrong answer in class.”

Her mother explained that in dating there will be lots of people who catch our eye, lots of people who we are interested in. But the challenge is to date and eventually yoke yourself to someone whose life manifests the fruits of the Holy Spirit; in particular, the first fruit of the spirit: love.

Whether we're dating or not, there's wisdom here: to seek out and surround ourselves with people who are patient, and kind – not envious, or boastful, or rude. But I'd like to encourage us to take this one step further, to actively make 1 Corinthians 13 our ethic. Even more profound than evaluating a crush by how fully they manifest the fruits of love is to use 1 Corinthians 13 to hold our ourselves to a standard of love. Instead of putting someone else's name into verses 4 through 7, try putting your own name in there:

“Bridget is patient; Bridget is kind; Bridget is not envious, or boastful, or arrogant, or rude. She doesn't insist on her own way; she is not irritable or resentful; she does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth. She bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.”

What if we were to use this ethic as a goal, as a means of evaluating ourselves and striving to live our Christian faith and to grow in our Christian faith? What if we would use this as a bedtime prayer to look back on our day asking: Was I patient? Was I kind? Was I boastful, or arrogant, or rude? Are there areas in that list – being patient, kind, boastful, arrogant, rude – that I need to work on in order to be the full person who Christ created me to be?

Or what about using this as an ethical decision-making tool? Does this thing that I'm looking at undertaking help me to be more patient, less irritable, or resentful? Am I motivated to do it because I rejoice in the truth? This could be useful in deciding whether to stay in a job or it could be helpful in those cycles in which we're struggling with our spouse or our children or anyone that we're close with.

Scott Hoezee of Calvin Theological Seminary looks at these verses, verses that were originally addressed to a church that wasn't getting along with each other, and reminds us that "love is patient" does not mean that love waits for things to turn out. It means that love is patient with the people who have hurt you. The Greek has to do with being slow to avenge injury. Love is forbearing with those who have offended you. And not just patient, but even kind. Love doesn't just put up with hurtful people; it's actually kind to them."

Hoezee goes on to encourage this take on the rest of Verse 4. "Love does not envy, or boast, and it is not proud." The words are so evocative. Envy is resenting what another one has, while boasting is crowing about what I have. And "proud" in the Greek is a word that refers to blowing or puffing or inflating one's self. Love is not puffed up with itself. Lovers are now blowhards. Love does not walk around with an inflated self sense of its own worth."

While this is helpful, this would be a weak ethic if it only stretched us in regard to our personal spirituality. In a week in which the world has been turned upside down after the Arlington baseball field shooting, and Officer Yenez was acquitted in the shooting death of Philando Castille, and so much of our government is continuing to confound us, our ethic of living the love of Christ is more relevant than ever.

On Wednesday, the Southern Baptist Convention voted to condemn white supremacy. Can I get an "Amen" in the church? That's incredible! The Southern Baptist Convention, which was founded on slavery, founded in the mid-1800s by Christians who refused to condemn and fight slavery, voted on Wednesday and I quote:

"that Southern Baptists decry every form of racism, including alt-right white supremacy, as antithetical to the Gospel of Jesus Christ and we denounce and repudiate white supremacy and every form of racial and ethnic hatred as of the devil."

That is strong. That is living Christ's love and understanding that the sins of our past do not have to be what we continue to live. This is an example of a church coming together to prophetically live the love of Christ.

And last weekend, the Wisconsin Conference of the United Church of Christ resolved:

“BE IT RESOLVED that the Wisconsin Conference of the United Church of Christ declares itself an ‘Immigrant Welcoming Conference’ and that it encourages the development of policies dedicated to facilitating the respectful welcome and inclusion of all immigrants into Wisconsin and calls on its members and congregations to become active ‘Immigrant Welcoming Congregations and Communities.’”

That's what our church that did that last weekend, our statewide church. These are acts of love born out of an ethic of love – not eros, the erotic or romantic love; not even philios, the love that we have for people we care about; but agape, the divine love that stretches us to collaborate with God to create the reign of God on earth, particularly for the most vulnerable.

Reverend Martin Luther King Jr., when speaking of love, challenged us. “Along the way of life, someone must have sense enough and morality enough to cut off the chain of hate. This can only be done by projecting the ethic of love to the center of our lives.”

Friends, in this troubled world, in this time of hatred and vitriol in the public square, and when we encounter times of struggle in our personal lives as well, projecting the ethic of love to the center of our lives couldn't be more relevant than it is today. And so my prayer for you – my prayer for all of us – is that we can center ourselves in 1 Corinthians 13, and that with the ethic of love at the center of our lives, our world and our lives will be more of what God created us to be. Alleluia and Amen.

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1 Corinthians 13

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