

May 10, 2009
1 John 4:7-12

The Bonds of Love

"God is love."

How many times have we said that without really considering what "love" actually is, what love really entails?

This Mother's Day I want to examine some of the ways we are called to embody the binding and loosing power of love.

This week's lesson teaches that love is the most characteristic manifestation of God we can imitate. Unfortunately "love" has also become one of the most meaningless words in our vocabulary.

The American Heritage Dictionary defines love in terms of sex and sports: an "intense affection and warm feeling for another person; strong sexual desire for another person) a strong fondness or enthusiasm; or a zero score in tennis."

The sacrificial, incarnational nature of Christ-like love has been lost amid our claims that we "love" our favorite drink, baseball team, or partner-of-the-moment.

Love has become such a nebulous, fuzzy; catch-all term that we resist thinking about what must be present for true love to exist and to flourish - for love to be able to "bear fruit."

Franklin Church is known as one of the most beautiful churches to be married in. As pastor let me relate a recent phone conversation. "The phone rings and the voice on the other end asks, 'Will you marry me?'

No, I reply, I am already married and like the wife I have.

But I am willing to talk to you about your wedding."

Since the bride to be got my joke, I then proceeded to explain the difference between weddings and marriages.

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"Couples are sometimes shocked when I tell them that I am not greatly concerned about their wedding but that I do care very much about their marriage."

The difference between the two is that a wedding is a ceremony where two people proclaim publicly their love for one another, receive the congregation's affirmation and blessings, and to seek God's approval upon their union.

Marriage, on the other hand, is a "lifetime commitment that binds two persons together so that they may build each other up, offer each other the gift of love, continue to grow and mature together, offer a strong home if they have children, and accept all their years together

One group of people paid to think about the ingredients that combine to create love, or at least an atmosphere where love can develop, are marriage therapists and counselors.

The science of psychotherapy has attempted to identify the ingredients contained in the art of love.

(One Couple/Four Realities, ed. Richard Chasin, Henry Grunebaum and Margaret Herzig, [New York and London: Guilford Press).

The report asks the question of why marriages stay together rather than why they fall apart or how they get started

Harvard therapist Henry Grunebaum keys in on the concept of "bonds," the strings of attachment that connect one person to another.

The language of "bonds" is immediately attractive because the life of faith is one of perpetual binding and loosing (e.g. Matt. 16:19). True love (unselfish and sacrificial) binds the lover completely and looses the beloved unconditionally.

This is the kind of love Christ gave us. By becoming a "bond-servant" to all, he loosed each one for eternal life. Paul says we are freed from everything, bound by nothing (loosed), yet a servant to everyone (bound).

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Can we love each other enough to be servants to one another? Can we bind ourselves to each other so that we can loose each other and free ourselves?

Dr. Grunebaum theorizes that five different types of bonds exist to greater or lesser extent within any love relationship. When taken together, this somehow creates the fabric of love.

One might call these five love bonds the padlock of wedlock.

The first padlock to wedlock is the gridlock of attachment and caring. While this may appear to be an obvious component of any love relationship, Harvard therapist Dr. Grunebaum suggests that for many this bond is fraught with problems.

The attachment/caring bond is established in an individual during infancy and childhood and is rooted in the parent-child relationship.

As the only one of Dr. Gruenbaum's five bonds on which we can blame our parents, it is the bond for which our behavior has the least rational explanations.

Patterns of attachment or detachment, of trust or distrust, of closeness or distance are imprinted on our newborn psyche, patterning our adult behavior for reasons we sometimes cannot even remember.

The second bond Grunebaum calls one of friendship and partnership.

Grunebaum notes that while the aspect of friendship is probably the least studied by therapists, it is one of the most common characteristics expressed by couples - that their spouse is their "best friend."

Poet Robert Creeley has put this in beautiful form in a poem from entitled "For Friendship":

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For friendship
make a chain that holds,
to be bound to others,
two by two,
a walk, a garland,
handed by hands
that cannot move
unless they hold.

Our ability to form bonds of friendship and partnership is rooted in our childhood, in our peers, our siblings, our play experiences that shape our friendship patterns.

Remember all those nasty children you were hurt by as a child when they wouldn't let you play with them, or when playing fair meant you lost, or when you failed to become a part of the most popular clique?

All these experiences affect your ability to be a friend, accept friendship, or maintain a friend-relationship over time, even with someone you love.

The third bond Grunebaum speaks of is the bond of sexuality and desire. An obvious component of any marriage relationship, this bond typically runs hot and cold.

Perhaps in part this is because its development is rooted in adolescence, a tumultuous period of ups and downs itself.

Passion, infatuation, desire, romance are all a part of this bond later in life. Grunebaum finds that desire is perhaps the most crucial, most fragile component within the bond of sexuality.

Despite attractiveness and physical need, without the mysterious chemistry of desire the sexual bond fades and withers.

The decision to marry or not still remains one of the most important decisions any person makes in their life.

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However unromantic it may sound, it appears to be true that both men and women use what is called "balance theory" when trying to come to that crucial decision - balancing what they have to offer against what the intended has to give.

As mature adults it is true that we take into account moral and intellectual values, ethnic and religious heritage, political and social views when making a decision for or against commitment.

For most of us this boils down to "like attracts like."

The final bond that Grunebaum theorizes is perhaps more an amalgamation of the other four than a completely separate way of bonding.

Called the social networks bond, this tie includes all those relationships which impinge closely on the married couple.

Children, parents, neighbors, congregations, business associates and colleagues all make up a part of who we are, and so influence the bonds that we are able to maintain with our spouse.

Testifying to the inescapable aspect of our psyche,

D.H. Lawrence stated that "In my own very self, I am part of my family."

Good marriages, good parents, good communities, good congregations build and bless these five "ties that bind."

When Christ calls us to God through love, are we capable of combining the bonds of

tender care, true friendship, selfless desire, mature commitment, and social concern into any relationship?

As Christians can we incorporate these bonds in an appropriate mixture into all our relationships?

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And as Christians can we accept and love those who fall far short of developing mature bonds in any of these areas, remembering that each of us is a product of genetic conditioning, heredity, learned responses, environment, and education?

Can we obey the call of God to offer love to those greatly unlike ourselves? Can we bear fruit for Christ in what may appear to be dry, barren relationships?

In the Guinness Book of World Records there is listed the shortest sermon ever preached. It was given by John Albrecht, an Episcopal priest in Michigan.

He stood in his pulpit to preach, paused, and said "Love!" He then sat down. Some of Rev. Albrecht's members said it was the best sermon he ever preached.

I wish I had thought of that!

Amen!

Prayer

O Lord, remember not only the men and women of good will, but also those of ill will. But do not remember all the suffering they have inflicted on us; remember the fruits we have bought, thanks to this suffering - our comradeship, our loyalty, our humility, our courage, our generosity, the greatness of heart which has grown out of all this, and when they come to judgment, let all the fruits which we have borne be their forgiveness.

--prayer written by an unknown prisoner
in Ravensbruck concentration camp
and left beside the body of a dead child.

