

The Transforming Power of Love

Last night I had the honor of fulfilling one of my favorite duties as a minister as I officiated the wedding of my friends, Tom and Amy. I love doing weddings because marriage is a picture by which we see the love of God. Our passage today tells of two lovers swept up in each other's lives in ways that transform their world. Last night over food and drink, ceremony and toasts, music and dancing I was reminded just how romantic and joyful weddings are.

Our passage from Song of Songs today is romantic. God here is not wrathful or vengeful. God is not a powerful force toppling mighty kingdoms or liberating the oppressed. God is not the divine peace that stills and quiets the soul. God is an intense passion. God is a desiring God. In the Song of Songs, God wants to give Israel, the church, human souls a big wet kiss. God wants to caress humanity, and if you keep reading in the rest of the book God wants to do a good deal more than that. God desires a relationship.

Love begins in desire, that feeling of longing, the need to know another and be known by them.

Our feelings are important. Perhaps you come to church to feel good which is no small thing in a world that often times makes us feel so bad. This is a place where you feel welcomed and accepted. For many church is a place where they feel refreshed and uplifted. Church can be a place where people feel empowered, discovering they were capable of more than they thought possible. Church can be a place where people feel God's love, God's peace. And it's easy to articulate the Transforming Power of Love just as the feelings they get in church, the feelings they have towards the community here, and so love then becomes doing the things at church that feel good and avoiding the things that feel bad. Who wants to go to a church that makes them feel bad? Church should be like the lover and beloved in the Song full of passionate desire.

Philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein says, "Love is not a feeling. It's something much more and deeper than that." It feels a bit odd to hear. Love should feel good. But think for just a moment of the face you make when you feel joy. Now think of how your face looks when you feel angry. Now what is the face you make when you feel love? For many of you, especially today, you probably reverted to the face you made when I asked you about joy. But while love may look joyful on a wedding day, love looks different sitting next to a hospital bed while a loved one breathes their last, and love looks different mourning their loss in the years to come. Love can look like feet tired from working a second shift to support a partner and love can sound like the angry chants calling for a better, more just world at a protest.

Love is not a feeling. I can feel nothing while feeding a hungry person and they've still been loved. I might feel intense anger towards an enemy and still love them by following Jesus' command to give them my coat when they're cold.

So if love isn't just a feeling, what else is it?

In the movie *Lady Bird*, the main character is a high school senior desperate to move away from her home city of Sacramento. She lives on the wrong side of the tracks from most of her classmates with a father suffering from depression and a mother whose love is often expressed through stern language and unreasonable expectations. Near the end of the movie, *Lady Bird* sits with a teacher from her school discussing her college application.

Sister Sarah Joan: You clearly love Sacramento.

Christine 'Lady Bird' McPherson: I do?

Sister Sarah Joan: You write about Sacramento so affectionately and with such care.

Christine 'Lady Bird' McPherson: I was just describing it.

Sister Sarah Joan: Well it comes across as love.

Christine 'Lady Bird' McPherson: Sure, I guess I pay attention.

Sister Sarah Joan: Don't you think maybe they are the same thing? Love and attention?

Don't you think maybe they're the same thing? Love and attention.

What does it look like for love to be attention and how might that love transform us?

James, instructs readers to be quick to listen, slow to speak, and slow to anger. To pay attention is difficult work. It requires meekness, the humility to admit one is wrong. It requires thinking, an activity that is actually best served by emotions not of intense passion, but steady consistency and dedication. I can't be the only one in hear whose fired of an email while angry late at night, indulging in a moment of passion that led me to be less thoughtful than I might've been otherwise. Attention requires us to think above and beyond just ourselves and to articulate our thoughts and desires in the clearest terms possible. Quieting ourselves, moving beyond our anger. This is what attention demands of us, and it doesn't always feel good.

And that's why James warns against anger. Be slow to anger. When I was a child and put up a fight with my parents about getting in the car seat or leaving the park too early or just generally not getting my way, they'd raise their voice, tense up. And I'd say "Mom, Dad are you mad?" "I'm not mad! I'm just frustrated!" It's a practice I continued when working with middle school students in Nashville. "Oh, Mr. John's mad!" "I'm not mad! I'm just frustrated!" The distinction seems to mean little in the moment, but it's important for thinking about how love might transform us, because anger actually is different than frustration. You get angry at a person, but

frustrated with a process. Anger is directed at another person, while frustration has to do with something larger just an individual or truth or a shared goal. A road trip with friends can be frustrated by a closed freeway, but a road trip can't be angered.

What does this have to do with the transforming power of love? Well if love is also attention, it requires something other than just our passionate feelings. Church, God will not always make us feel good. Others will not always make us feel good, but love as attention calls us to humility, to rise above our boisterous ego and see the world outside of ourselves and carefully describe our frustration in ways that the person we're tempted to be angry with can at least see, understand, and respond to.

Attention is *not* a balancing act. It's not just hearing both sides and finding the middle ground between them which is surely where the truth resides. It's not difficult to look back through history to see how playing to the middle when one side is clearly wrong has disastrous results. The truth about slavery's morality was not found somewhere between the abolitionists and the plantation owners.

James describes this process as like looking in a mirror, taking time to carefully reflect not just upon ourselves, but upon our world and the world we share with others. Author Merve Emre writes "If I care about building a world . . . with you or for you, then I should think about that world in the most accurate and realistic terms possible. I should hold you to the same standards of precision that I hold myself; even—and especially—if we disagree; even—and especially—if that disagreement is uncomfortable and alienating."

This is not easy and we're often not good at it, but church is a place where we are called to practice that kind of love. The kind of love in which I quiet my anger towards you and we each describe our world in the most accurate, reasonable way possible.

I have to do that because love as feeling desire without attention can so quickly turn into anger.

But doing this is hard work. It's not easy. because attention is difficult, because if we hope to be transformed by the power of love we're going to have to work at it. Love is also commitment. James says "Do not just hear the word, but be doers of the word." Love is not just feelings and not just thinking attention, but lived commitment.

And it's commitment to hearing the word. The "word" here is the same Word as in the book of John, the word that became flesh and dwelt among us. That is, we listen to the words of Jesus, the words that promise not just that we can be transformed, but that we must transformed because it's not what goes into our bodies that defiles us, but what comes out. To fail to live and

love as Jesus lived and love means that all our feelings and desires, all our attention would be for nothing.

And to be committed, to be committed to act is dangerous. If you're looking for a religion or a way of life that promises you good feelings, unrelenting joy in this life, you'd probably do well to find a different one than the one whose revelation of love was comradeship with the lowly, life lived among the outcasts, and death upon a cross. But if you're looking for a religion that promises to transform you through the power of love, it seems a resurrected Jesus might be one for you.

Attention without commitment can just turn into distraction.

So what does all this lead to, love as this desire driven, attentive act of commitment?

Sacrifice may not be a very popular word, and it may not be very fun to think about. Which is funny because each and every day so many in our world sacrifice so very much. Several days per week, adults all over the country sacrifice about 8-10 hours of their time to be away from family, away from friends, usually doing something they don't want to do and sometimes doing things they don't think are worthwhile or make a meaningful contribution to the world. We call this a "job." And it's a sacrifice of time and labor in exchange for money so that someone can use what the product of that work to make more money. It's a sacrifice whether we think of it or not, and for most of our country it's the most consistent, longest lasting type of sacrificial relationship they'll have.

But it's not love. It's not love because it can only be rewarded with money. And it's not love because unlike a marriage or a church where you can see and know the people you're sacrificing for, when you sacrifice for your job the benefits go off to someone far away, probably someone with a lot more power than you.

And so we're presented with a choice. G.A. Cohen has written, "The chief problem, in politics as in personal life, is a sound choice of sacrifices, and there is damage to both thought and practice when people imagine that sacrifice is avoidable."

We do not choose whether or not to sacrifice, only what it is we sacrifice and for what purpose.

The Song says that love isn't something you can buy. If you were to trade love for all the money in your house, you'd be a fool. Love is a force, love is stronger than death. It's not something that can be bought or sold. George Orwell in a satirical bit of writing shows just how absurd exchanging love for money is by rewriting Paul's famous 1 Corinthians 13 passage on love.

“Money is patient, money is kind. Money does not envy. Money does not boast... If I could speak in the tongues of men and angels but have not money, I am nothing.”

And we can feel this tension between love or money right there at the end of James: that pure religion is care for the widows and the orphans, a willingness to lose oneself and all that one has for the love of those that our world mistreats and despises.

It's easy to have feelings of pity for the poor. We see an infomercial, hear a testimony, see a picture on Facebook that tugs at our hearts and makes us feel sympathy and maybe even compels us to go volunteer somewhere. But our feelings can be fickle, there's a reason the book of Songs is short and in the middle of the Bible. It's intensity is not long lasting. And if we're going to be transformed by love it is *not* because we just have a relationship and our feelings change.

Love that transforms us is more than feelings and if we are to love the poor we also have to pay attention. We pay attention to them and to our world, quieting our own prejudices that say that some people are in poverty because they aren't willing to work hard and if you aren't willing to work you might as well starve. Slow to speak. Quick to listen. Slow to anger. We pay attention to the systems of our world and the way they distribute what we have leaving some excluded and others with an abundance and we have to describe that world in the most realistic terms possible, even and especially if it means disagreement and alienation with our friends or the rich and powerful. And then we become committed. Committed to the word, the word that preached good news to the poor, freedom to the captive, and whose solidarity with those in poverty was so strong it led him to the sacrifice that stands at the center of human history which is the revelation of love that transforms not just your life and mine, but the entire world.

Amen.