

## THE ONE THING

Texts on Sunday, May 8, 2011

Mother's Day

1 John 4: 7-12, 18-21; Luke 8: 19-21

Four or five years ago, I was among several thousands assembled in the stadium of the University of Buffalo as the Dalai Lama spoke. His thoughts were disarmingly simple—he is the first to say so—and none more so than a theme he struck which must occur to many people from time to time. *What if we cared for all we whom we meet the way our mother cared for us?* Now, we know that some mothers gave precious little love at the needed time. If for some here now, that was “the fact of the mother,” we understand that praise for her can be hard to hear. Nevertheless, no matter your story, every person can trust her feet to the path of wisdom laid by love. Here, from a recent book, the Dalai Lama expands on the truth deep in a mother's love:

One reflection that arises from the agreement of all the major religious traditions on the centrality of compassion is that it reminds us [that] because we have all been nurtured in a womb, because we are all born of a mother, affection is in our basic nature. From the loving caress of a mother's touch to the intimate connection with her breast as we suck, not only are we brought into being through love, but also our young life is nourished and nurtured through love. Today we know that a mother's physical touch plays a crucial role in the development of a child's brain in the first weeks of life. It is in this affection that the preciousness of life is rooted; it is from this seed of affection that the great tree of compassion can grow. (*Toward a Kinship of Faiths*, 121)

Thus we began. Yet this master says only that the tree of compassion *can* grow from this seed—not that it just *does* grow. The fact is that though we once took such love gladly, hungrily, mostly we do not give as we received. Why, mothers themselves tend to reserve the gift of unconditional love only for their own. Why do we not spread it—not to our own hurt, of course—but why not be liberally and warmly concerned for the other's welfare always? When they stumble in duty, why do we attack, rather than offer a hand or kind direction? Why not suffer with any when they suffer? When Rabbi Michael Lerner of Beyt Tikkun in Oakland asks congresspersons to sign on to his [Global Marshall Plan](#) and business people to account for a “new bottom line” of love, why do eyes roll as if love so amazing, so divine is plain ridiculous in the real world—or at least belongs only up in God's storehouse, an uninheritable fortune? Are we utterly lost?

The Christian tradition has said Yes, indeed we are lost, so long as we go on hating our brothers and sisters. From the mount, Jesus says that “if you are angry with a brother or sister, you will be liable to judgment; if you call someone ‘Fool!’ you will be liable to the hell of fire.” You know, my mother loved us, and love certainly included correction and punishment, but never did she slam us like Jesus slams us for the mean things we said. Who is this Jesus? His own mother and brothers come to see their boy on the big stage and they

try to go backstage for some family time—doesn't a mother's love give her a prior claim to fame?—and he just about blasts the whole family off the hill. "My mother and my brothers are those who are hearing and doing the word of God." We might have wrestled today with an even harder saying. Many shake their heads where Jesus says "Whoever does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters . . . cannot be my disciple." (Luke 14: 26) (Note to self: no more Hallmark cards written by the man from Nazareth.) But seriously, the gospel seems torn with contradictions, commanding greater love here, and there separation from our loved ones, and in the end, fearsome consequences for failure to follow. Is there a way through these thorns?

A mother's love can show part of the way through. We have only to ask, *What was the aim of her love?* If it was free enough and good enough, that love was given so that one thing might follow: that a being flourish and become whole and integrated and one, no more dependent on the mother. This is different from the sentiments set down in a Mother's Day greeting card. They weigh altogether on the side of her nurture, but every sound mother knows that that weight is unbalanced. Love is not complete until it lets go and lets a soul be . . . an individual. If you are a young adult, you may recall part of the shock or surprise of separating from home, when you left the close care of your home and went off to begin life as an individual. But no child of any age can grasp love's aim from that end. That mystery is carried in the parent's heart, whose end in loving was to let it end, to let a new being be. Think about this a little more with me.

Love, if it is from God, always has this dual character—both in touch *and* separate, both union and differentiation, both shared *and* individual. Swing too much to either pole and love disintegrates. An infant or a child or a marriage partner left too much alone is obviously not loved; but the same one held too close or too long is also obviously not loved, but fused to the parent or partner—and confused.

All this seems commonsense, though God knows the balances are easily lost. But God does not gather the church to hear common sense; rather, to bring us beyond our natural force, to transcend the ordinary limits of our old self, indeed to become children not of our parents, but of God. The love needed in this world of sorrows is simply not of ordinary issue. The feelings of gratitude we may have for our mothers, beautiful and graceful though they be, quite obviously have never of themselves issued as the love of Christ in a manner able to bring compassion front and center on our life's stage. Let it be said never more plainly: the one thing God's church is for, that one thing prior to any other thing, is to take you from your mother's arms, out of the family and the familiar, and to bring you where God can grow you to spiritual maturity, able to love anyone.

When Jesus refuses special attention from his family in the crowd, he is warning us to beware of settling in with a small set of the church, that part we're familiar with, or family with. When he says, *Unless you hate mother and father, you cannot be my disciple*, he is after one thing: that you and I learn to differentiate our self from our crowd and depend on them no more for our identity; and that we learn that love is not fusion or confusion, but a unity in differences. This may sound obvious, even trite. But humans find the task of loving across differences so unfamiliar, so difficult, that 2000 years of church tradition have not delivered us to a new age where Jesus' commandment comes easy. Oh, we grasp the connection and union side of love, with those we like. It's the separation side of love that bedevils us. It's loving the ones we don't like, the ones not like us—and letting them be the beings they are. Yet that is the one thing Jesus seeks. "The commandment we have from him is this: those who love God must love their brothers and sisters also."

Jesus' challenge for those who want to grow up in him is that we hold ourselves rigorously to account for every breakdown in our relationships with one another. "Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love," the Spirit says. Follow the spiritual logic here. If you and I are unkind toward anyone in any way, the cause is that we do not know God. We might well carry in our pocket a card engraved thus: *When I am unkind it is because I do not know God*. Don't be easy on yourself. Don't rationalize your withering, clever criticisms. Don't excuse your outbursts as natural, or only human, or "what he deserved because he started it." See how high the cost is for putting yourself in the right for bad action! For if you put yourself in the right, well, you win! Big deal. How is that going for you? But if you acknowledge that your bitterness or disrespect or fear toward others means that you do not know God, then hear the extraordinary promise in that word. You thought you knew God; now you see that there is so much more good yet to come. For "love is from God; everyone who loves is born of God and knows God." How thrilling, at any age, to open in hope for more of the gifts of God.

"There is no fear in love . . . for fear has to do with punishment." If we had not dared to acknowledge that we do not love because we were afraid to think that we do not know God—for fear of punishment!—well, how little we know God! God is love. God desires only truth in our inmost being. God is not God of fusion or confusion, but would wean you from all your fears and your familiars, that you may stand distinct and separate and free upon the earth, able to love anyone. This is the one thing God seeks for you, above all. To teach you to love is the first purpose of God's church. All signs of *thy kingdom come on earth* are made manifest through love—"not that we love God but that he loves us and sends his son into the world that we might live through him."

Let us apply these things to God's church on this corner, The Riverside Church. How are we doing? Let the letter of John read us. "Those who say, 'I love God,' and hate their brothers or sisters—those who do not love a brother or sister whom they have seen, cannot love God whom they have not seen." How are we doing? OK? Do you remember that book from the 1970s called *I'm OK, You're OK*. When it was still the rage, Bill Coffin used to say that while popular culture claims that I'm OK and you're OK, Christianity teaches: I'm not OK, and you're not OK—but that's OK. It's OK to say we do not yet know God well. There is so much good in store.

When people have fought unkindly, anxious and disrespectful and with awful seriousness, the main cause is that the organization has lost its sense of identity. You may hear people analyzing and blaming others for this or that failure—why, you may do it yourself—but I recommend you discount toward zero the usefulness of blaming individuals as cause-of-problem in the organization. Likewise, discount toward zero all crediting of individuals as solution-to-problem. Let it go. Those efforts to assign cause and effect are basically power struggles. Fear struggles. Love does not struggle in that way.

When people fight unkindly (note well: good ways to fight certainly exist; we have no interest in false harmony) the sound analysis is not that someone screwed up, but that the whole organization is dislocated from its sense of identity, like a house off its foundation. It's OK. When world-historical change has shifted all the ground beneath an institution, foundations slip. Look, the whole United States is off the foundation. How better to understand the bitterness and cruelty of a people who like to think themselves religious? How is identity reestablished? Not through a struggle where the strong win and the weak lose. Whoever has been married or partnered knows that when it comes to a fight, if you win absolutely, you lose everything. It is the same here. Power struggle is not how the future will re-form for us, because the whole purpose of a church, as of a marriage—and quite unlike most businesses—is to grow and develop beings able to become one thing: children of God, able to love.

For that reason, the way forward here is not a power struggle, but what we might call "the love struggle." This is the struggle to be born anew in the strength to love. Everything I plan to do with you as your minister in this interim aims to make the love struggle real and practical, so that each of us more and more may stand distinct and clear, birthed as an individual soul, able to love. When we feel this life from God—for love is from God—then our identity will come clear and The Riverside Church will again move for the whole world.

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in the City of New York*