

FROM BEAR CREEK UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

Reaching Out in Love

David Orendorff Luke 9:51-56 July 24, 2005

So, perhaps you are wondering as I am wondering what kind of life we will have together. What kind of pastor will I be with you? What kind of congregation will you be with me? Will we do works of mercy together? Will we come to love each other?

Already you have shown your love to Vickie and to me. I am grateful for the work you have done with Pastor Roger in forming a congregation committed to mission and spreading the Gospel. We are especially grateful for the hard and long work done to make the parsonage a fine home. What effort you put into the carpet, painting, appliances, the kitchen and who knows what all else. We thank you. All this effort we receive as loving gift and we feel welcome and wanted.

But still, in me, and I speculate it is in more than a few of you, there endures the question: "Will we come to love each other or will our love fail and we reject each other? This is the question of marriages, friendships, parenting, and even our work lives. This question is born of our most basic need, to love and be loved. There is nothing more important to our lives than loving and being loved.

Ken Davis tells the following story about our need for love:¹

I know kids don't like it, you go up and hug them and say I love you...You're bigger, you can take them.

Don't stop saying it. I would try to coerce her (my daughter). I would say, "I love you." (Pause) She would say, "Me too." I would say, "Say it." She would say, "I just did."

13-14-15-16 I did not hear the words. And time and time again, because I am no different than anybody else, you see this wound is universal, it doesn't matter whether you sit at the top of a corporate ladder, or whether you drive a tractor on a farm, it doesn't matter whether you're a teenager or you're an adult, it doesn't matter whether you're male or female, all of us are born with this desperate need to be loved. And we will do some things that will destroy our lives trying to heal that wound in our hearts. When I worked with young people I saw young men and young women enter into some relationships that were the most bogus and obviously destructive things from the very beginning. They even settle for a cheap substitute for love rather than not be loved at all.

I wanted to hear the words "I love you." When she was 16 I remember I cornered her in the kitchen one day and said, "Honey, I love you, I love you." And she said, "Whatever." You know I laugh at it now but at the time she might as well pulled a knife from the little holder there and run it through my heart. At (17?) years old I left her in a college dorm room. Tears streaming down my face I grabbed her by the shoulders and established eye contact, and I said, "Tracy, I love you." And at 18 years old she said, "Me too." And I drove 800 miles weeping because I just want to be loved. I just want to be loved.

A couple of months later I was invited to speak at her school. I enjoy speaking. I can hardly wait to get up here. I love listening to the music and everything, but I can just hardly wait, I want to go. But I was terrified because she was in the audience and I didn't want to embarrass her. I stood up and gave my speech and after the speech the college chaplain invited me out to lunch. My daughter went to class. We went to a nice Italian restaurant. He pulled from his briefcase a stack of response cards. He probably had a couple of hundred of them. He said in

¹ This is from a recorded workshop at Willow Creek Community Church, August, 2000.

his entire tenure at the school he had never seen such a positive response to any chapel service that had ever been presented. And he read to me some of the things those children had written. I was very gratified. I took a bite of spaghetti. He reached into his pocket and he grabbed a single card. He said, "Here is a card that I think will interest you." I looked at the card and written on the front of the card was my daughter's name, Tracy Lynn Davis. And I couldn't turn it over.

I've jumped out of an airplane at 8,000 feet. I love driving fast cars. I have an airplane of my own that I flew to Alaska and landed in places where people have never landed. There is a guide up there that said he will never fly again after riding with me. I love danger but I couldn't turn the card over. You see there is only one thing worse than knowing that wound exists, only one thing, and that is taking the chance that someone will rip it open even more widely. Finally I just turned it over and written on the other side in huge round letters were these words, "I love my daddy."

I spat spaghetti all over the table. I was so embarrassed I ran from the room and found a little bathroom and closed the door. There was a little latch, I can still see it, and I slammed that latch shut, and I cried like a child, "O Jesus, she loves me, O God!" I didn't know there was a guy in there.

We, all of us, just want to love and we want to be loved.

In spite of your gracious and loving welcome of Vickie and of me there is a small fearful child within that is afraid of not being loved and who insists on sharing his fears. This "little David" does not dominate who I am but he certainly is vocal in asking, "Will they like me? Will they come to love me? Or will I be rejected?"

We encounter this frightened child in changing relationships, changing locations, changing jobs. Every new encounter with the ones we love, or even with strangers, holds the potential of wounding us by rejecting us. Always in the background of our lives there is a little fearful child waiting to be proved right and singing mindlessly and mournfully:

*Nobody likes me,
Everybody hates me,
Guess I better go eat worms.
Great big fat ones,
Little tiny skinny ones,
Guess I better go eat worms.*

The disciples know this sad song of love and its fear of rejection. On their way to Jerusalem, they enter a Samaritan village to find lodging and to share Jesus' word of love. But the village rejects them, refuses them any kind of hospitality.

It is not that the people of this Samaritan village are particularly bad. They have good reason for their fear and their rejection. In the past, they have hosted many such pilgrims; pilgrims who come from Galilee, in the north, on their way to worship Yahweh in Jerusalem, at the temple on Mount Zion, in the south. The Samaritans don't worship on Mount Zion; they worship on Mount Gerizim, a place which for them is the meeting of heaven and earth. The Samaritans know, because the pilgrims have repeatedly told them, that their place of worship and their form of worship is rejected. Such pilgrims as these have called the Samaritans all sorts of foul names, declaring them to have a false faith and to be the worst kind of fallen heretics. The Samaritans have had their love burned by such pilgrims as these.

So this time they burn before they are burned. After all, why should they receive those who reject them? Why should they offer their beds and their food to ones who don't love them? Why should they offer any kindness to strangers who believe they are untouchable, undesirable, unwanted and unlovable? So in their hurt and fear they refuse to house or hear Jesus.

Jesus' disciples James and John take offense at their rejection. And when they are burned by the Samaritans, they want to burn back. They recall the prophet Elijah and ask Jesus, "Lord, do you want us to bid fire come down from heaven and consume them?"

Such is the cycle of wounded love. One rejection begets another and those who are made to love and be loved find themselves in the midst of words and wars of hate. After the reasons for lost love are long forgotten, rejection continues to destroy.

This history of violence from rejected love exists among all peoples. In his book, Passage to Junea, Jonathan Raban describes two villages of native peoples who are engaged in an age old blood feud, much like the Hatfields and McCoys, counting who killed who last and who is ahead in body count. The history of every people contains the tragedies of rejection and the cycles of revenge. The Irish, the Palestinian, the Serb, the Tutu, the people of Darfur, all of us, know this cycle of wounding and being wounded, of violence begetting violence, of death.

This is not the first time, nor will it be the last time, that Jesus knows rejection, is burned. You remember when Jesus began preaching at his home church in Nazareth, his neighbors responded to his sermon by taking him to the edge of a cliff and threatening to throw him over it. Soon after the rejection in Samaria, Jesus will be rejected by the people of Jerusalem, who will in fact kill him as a heretic and political threat.

It is in the face of rejected love that Jesus best demonstrates why he is greater than all others. Facing rejection Jesus responds to his disciple's desire for revenge by rebuking their suggestion of "fire from heaven" and leading them to simply move on to the next village, to the next people who might be open to love. Some ancient texts add this saying of Jesus to the story:

You do not know what manner of spirit you are of; for the Son of man came not to destroy men's lives but to save them.

Jesus ends the cycle of wounded violence and chooses another way. Jesus is the one who when burned chooses to focus not on the burning, not on how hurt, afraid and angry he is, not on how he will get even, but on loving the next village and saving the next life. It is the love of Jesus that Paul encourages when he writes to the Romans, "Do not repay anyone evil for evil...but overcome evil with good."²

Jesus is the friend and lover we all desire and need. He knows our wounds for he has born our rejection, and still he would love us. As the old hymn sings, "What a friend we have in Jesus, all our sins and griefs to bear!" When we are at our worst; when we have failed to love and we suffer the agony of rejection; Jesus is there for us, befriending us with an infinite love that heals us, saves us and calls us to reach out and love again.

Henri Nouwen describes the friendship we are looking for, the friendship Jesus offers, in his book The Inner Voice of Love:

But now you must seek friends to whom you can relate from your center, from the place where you know that you are deeply loved. Friendship becomes more and more possible when you accept yourself as deeply loved....Real friends find their inner correspondence where both know the love of God. Their spirit speaks to spirit and heart to heart...

Dare to love and to be a real friend. The love you give and receive is a reality that will lead you closer and closer to God as well as to those whom God has given you to love.³

We are called to keep our eyes not on the rejection of love, but upon the infinite possibilities we have to love one another and to gratefully rejoice in the unearned, gracious gifts of love we receive.

My first views of Bear Creek United Methodist Church tell me you are a village that has

² Paul's Letter to the Romans, 12:17a, 21b.

³ Henri Nouwen, The Inner Path of Love, (Doubleday, New York, 1996), 80-81

received Jesus with hospitality and an attentive ear.

When I listen to Justin Myers and the Staff Parish Relations Committee speak of your life together, I see Jesus' loving made flesh in you. You truly care for each other and for your community. The work with the preschool group, most of whom are not a part of this church village, speaks loudly of your commitment to reach out and love all of God's children. The preschool is a worthy mission in response to Jesus' call to "Let the children come to me." And your commitment to extend your care so that the children know of Jesus' love for them, to make Vacation Bible School and Sunday School here for your children and any child who would come, again speaks of your hospitable love. The same is true of the programs and time you offer to youth with various events and gatherings, with the upcoming youth mission trip to White Swan. It is very apparent that you are a village of God lovers. Your love is apparent in the choir, the music teams, the men's breakfast, the study, covenant and reunion groups, the way you simply talk to each other and care for each other in sickness and celebration. It has taken no time at all for me to notice that you are a loving family.

Our Bear Creek mission statement says it all:

The mission Bear Creek United Methodist Church is to create a diverse family place of belonging for all people and to reach out and made Disciples of Christ.

I must tell you that I am very pleased to be called to serve you and standing against the frightened child within, I believe that we shall indeed come to love each as we reach out to each other and to our community.

We share a simple faith that binds us in love. It is our faith which confidently declares that by the grace of God, known to us in Jesus our Christ, we are deeply, profoundly and forever loved. In this grace made love we refuse to burn those who have burned us and instead reach out with grace and love to all who would receive our love. And in the loving hospitality of our village all wounds are healed and life's rich wonder and joy come to be. By this faith the love we desire finds us. May it always be so.

Shalom and Amen.