

**The Road Less Travelled, Learning to Love, 18.11.12
10 am St Mary's, Heb 10:1-14, 19-25**

A college professor had his sociology class go into the Baltimore slums to get case histories of 200 young boys. At the end they were asked to write an evaluation of each boy's future. In every case the students wrote "He hasn't got a chance."

Twenty-five years later another sociology professor came across the earlier study. He had his students follow up on the project to see what had happened to these boys. With the exception of 20 boys who had moved away or died, the students learned that 176 of the remaining 180 had achieved more than ordinary success as lawyers, doctors and businessmen.

The professor was astounded and decided to pursue the matter further. He tracked them down and asked each one, "How do you account for your success?" In each case the reply came, "There was a teacher."

The teacher was still alive, so he sought her out and asked the old but still alert lady what magic formula she had used to pull these boys out of the slums into successful achievement.

The teacher's eyes sparkled and her lips broke into a gentle smile. "It's really very simple," she said. "I loved those boys."

I wonder if you are someone who has been lucky enough to have known love in your life. It could be the love of a husband or wife, a mother or father, a friend, God, or all sorts of other

relationship. If you have been you'll know how wonderful it can be. It can transform your life, it can help you get through tough times, it can make the good times that much brighter. Love may or may not make the world go round, but it does make the ride worthwhile.

In the concluding chapters of the letter to the Hebrews, the writer urges his readers to continue in their Christian faith, and in particular he encourages them to love one another. "Let us consider how to provoke one another to love" he writes.

The theme of loving one another, of course, is like a golden thread running through the fabric of the Bible – beginning with the books of Moses in Leviticus, and of course finding supreme expression in the life and teaching of Jesus.

But how might we provoke one another to love, as Hebrews says? Today I'd like to look at this theme, and see what it might teach us.

The first thing I want to say is this. Love is a choice. Jesus says that to love is a commandment. In other words, it's something we can choose to do or not do. Love is a choice.

That needs to be said in today's society, because too often love is seen as a feeling. Of course, there are feelings of love – and they are wonderful. And it is easier to love when we feel the feelings, but it is possible to love without them. At the end of the day, for the Christian, love is a decision. It is a choice.

The person who truly loves does so because they have made a commitment to be loving whether or not they feel like it. "The

heart is like a garden. It can grow compassion or fear: resentment or love. What seeds will you plant there?”

Actually this is liberating to us. For it means that any of us can love, because we can all choose to love.

When I meet a couple who want to get married in church, I always go through the service with them, and the vows that take to each other. And I make the point that, despite what Hollywood might say, at no point in the service do they utter the words ‘I do’. No, they say, ‘I will’. Love is an act of the will. It is a choice.

If you’re anything like me, to be asked to love some people can be met with, let’s say, resistance. Unholy thoughts may fill our minds. However, if we are able to observe these thoughts and choose to move beyond them without acting on them, we allow for the possibility of love. In doing so we enlarge our hearts. We feel better about ourselves – bigger somehow, more grounded, more mature.

I suspect that Baltimore teacher didn’t have *feelings* of love towards all those boys all the time, yet she still chose to love them.

Two ways that can help us love someone when we have few feelings of love:

First of all, concentrate on the good in that person. Sometimes it is well hidden, but it is always there. Remember that this person is some mother’s son or daughter. Choose instead – and there’s that word ‘choose’ again – choose instead to try to

nurture what is good within their souls, instead of concentrating on the bad.

Howard Hendricks was in year 5 at school. He was a complete tearaway. He felt insecure, unloved and generally angry. His teacher once said to him in exasperation, “Howard, you are the worst behaved child in this school!”

And then he went up to year 6. The first day of the school year, his teacher went down the register, and came to his name. “Howard Hendricks” she said, and looked up at him. “I’ve heard a lot about you.” Then she smiled and added, “But I don’t believe a word of it!”

Howard wrote later:

... that moment was a fundamental turning point, not only in my education, but in my life. Suddenly, unexpectedly, someone believed in me. For the first time in my life, someone saw potential in me... She gave me little jobs to do. She invited me to come in after school to work on my reading and arithmetic. She challenged me with higher standards.

... someone was willing to give me a chance. Someone was willing to believe in me while challenging me with higher expectations. That was risky, because there was no guarantee that I would honour her trust.

Now, I’m not saying that when we extend love to someone who we find difficult they are going to change overnight – or even at all. But we might be used by God to give that person a chance.

And secondly consider with compassion how they might have ended up the way they are. Have they been shown love in their lives? What have they suffered? What have they not been taught?

A young man is constantly in trouble with the law and getting into fights. He can't hold down a job – or a girlfriend. He always seems withdrawn and uncommunicative. No one knows he doesn't know who his Dad is, and his Mum is in prison, and he spent most of his teenage years with foster families.

An elderly woman at Church is argumentative and always seems to be angry. Criticisms flow from her lips with alarming regularity. No one knows that she has never got over losing her baby daughter 40 years ago.

I'm not saying that someone's past always provides a valid excuse for their words or actions, but it can help us look with compassion on them. We don't know what experiences they have had that have brought them to where they are now. There but for the grace of God go I.

So, love is a choice.

Secondly, receive as well as give. Jesus said love *one another*. There is the idea of reciprocity – we need to receive as well as give. We'll be no good to anyone if we give and give and give, but never receive, and end up with some kind of love burn out.

Even Jesus needed to receive love from his friends. In the Garden of Gethsemane when he was almost overwhelmed with

his mission of dying on the cross, he needed to take his three closest friends with him while he prayed.

And the man who washed his disciples feet at the Last Supper, he too had his own feet washed by Mary just a few days before.

Loving others is never to be confused with being a doormat.

And thirdly, Jesus taught that there is a connection between our loving one another, and our own joy. He said this:

I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete.

In a 2007 study, two groups of students were asked to complete surveys which indicated how happy they were. Then one group of students were asked to perform five random acts of kindness a week for six weeks, while the other group had no such request made of them. The group who did the acts of kindness were significantly happier at the end of the six weeks.

The psychiatrist Viktor Frankl, who survived the Nazi concentration camps, wrote this:

“The more one forgets himself – by giving himself to a cause to serve or another person to love – the more human he is and the more he actualizes himself.”

Loving others has also been shown to be correlated to lower levels of heart disease, faster times for wound healing, and stronger immune systems.

One academic, in summarising many different research projects about the psychological and physiological benefits of loving others wrote this:

“Unselfish love and kindness, including manifestations such as forgiveness, displace emotional states such as rage, bitterness, loneliness and hatred, all of which cause stress and stress-related illness through adverse impact on immune function.”

As Christians, this should not surprise us – we are, after all made in the image of God, and we become more fully who we were meant to be, when we behave like our maker – like the God who is rich in love. We were made to love.

So, three things about loving

1. That it is a commandment, and therefore a choice.
2. That we are to love one another – it is a two way process. We are to receive love as well as to give.
3. It fulfils us: it leads to joy, as Jesus said.

Some words from Mother Teresa:

Spread love everywhere you go: first of all in your own house. Give love to your children, to your wife or husband, to a next door neighbour... Let no one ever come to you without leaving better and happier: be the living expression of God's kindness; kindness in your face; kindness in your eyes, kindness in your smile; kindness in your warm greeting.

Let's pray together:

I'd like to begin by asking you to call to mind anyone who has shown love to you over your lifetime. It could be in small or large ways. It could be someone who is alive or who has passed away. In the quiet, call them to mind, and give thanks for them.

Pause.

And now I'd like you to call to mind someone who you find it hard to love. It could be someone at work or at home, or another member of the family, someone at church or someone at a social group. As you think about them, consider their good points, and also think about what might have caused them to be like they are. *Pause.* And because of that, or despite that, remember Jesus' words to love them. It is a choice. Do you wish to make that decision? And what will you do? *Pause.* The heart is like a garden. It can grow compassion or fear: resentment or love. What seeds will you plant there?