

"LOVE LESSONS"

A Sermon By

Philip A. C. Clarke

Park Avenue United Methodist Church
106 East 86th Street
New York, New York 10028
May 10, 1998

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INTRODUCTION

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"Never kiss in front of other people. It's a big embarrassment if anybody sees you. But, if nobody sees you, I might be willing to try it with a handsome boy...but just for a few hours...."

Question three: is it better to be single or married? Well, nine year old, Lynette, responded to this great debate with these thoughts. "It's better for girls to be single, but not for boys. Boys need somebody to clean up after them!" And concerning why lovers often hold hands, eight year old, David, said: "They want to make sure their rings don't fall off because they paid good money for them".

TRANSITION

It's impossible to overemphasize the importance of love in the teachings of Jesus. And today, on this Mother's Day, 1998, let's take the time to look at and to think about one of the most important teachings of Jesus about love. It's there for us in the 13th chapter of John's Gospel. Jesus said,

"A new command I give you. LOVE one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. And by this all men will know that you are My disciples, if you love one another....."

LOVE REQUIRES HARD WORK

Why did Jesus command us to love one another? Any answers? Doesn't it mean, first of all, that love requires work? A myth in our culture is that love just comes naturally...that it's easy....but that's not always the case. It's a bit absurd. You and I have lived long enough to know that we have to work continually at relationships.

I remember reading a few years ago that the Harry S. Truman Library out in Independence, Missouri made public 1300 recently discovered letters that the late President wrote to his wife, Bess, over the course of a half-century. Mr. Truman apparently had a life-long rule of writing to his wife every day they were apart. This was a rule he faithfully followed whenever he was away on official business or whenever Bess left Washington and the White House to return to their home base in Independence. Can you imagine that? Every day he was away, the President of the United States took time out from his dealings with the world's most powerful leaders and pressing problems to write a letter to his wife. And scholars are examining those letters to see if they shed any new light on our political and diplomatic history. What an example!

Love requires work. Love has to be nurtured. Little babies, the most loveable creatures in this world, have to be taught to love...taught to share. They have to learn that they have certain responsibilities to others. Love is something at which you work. It requires special attention.

Did you hear about the young man who was being interviewed for a job as a magician. The carnival director who was interviewing him asked him what his best trick was and he said that it was "sawing a woman in half...that's really my best one!" "Isn't that a difficult trick?" asked the director. The young magician answered,

"Oh, not really....I've been able to do that one since I was a child....I've always practiced that one on my sisters....."

"And do you come from a large family?" asked the director of the interview.

"Well...." said the magician, "I have eight half-sisters!"

It takes a few seconds for my humor to hit the back of the church....but it is a hook to hang this thought on that with more and more second and third marriages....and more and more "half-brothers" and "half-sisters"....many families are having to work especially hard "at love". And help us to love those whom we find "difficult to love". Love requires a bit of effort...indeed, a bit of work. That's the first lesson from this command of Jesus that we are to love one another.

THE MARK OF THE CHRISTIAN IS LOVE

A second thing to pick up on here and to take away is that love is the distinguishing mark, the distinguishing characteristic of the Christian. Jesus put it this way,

"By this....all men will know that you are My disciples....if you love one another...."

At time we forget this and sometimes get things fouled up and think that there's something else that characterizes the Christian. For example, right living or church attendance or perhaps tithing. But then Jesus comes before us and reminds us that the world will know you are my disciples....by your love. Living right is important. It's important to attend church and to support it with "prayers...presence...gifts...service". But the real thing and the real mark of the Christian is found in his or her capacity to love.

Back in the year 1991, a delegation of Christian leaders from our country travelled to Moscow to share ideas with business, government and media leaders in Russia. Communism's fall had left a leadership vacuum and the people were desperate for guidance and inspiration from the outside world. Everywhere this delegation went, they were greeted with respect and kindness and along the way were confronted with questions dealing with morality, with faith, with God.

There was a meeting scheduled with the Academy of Social Sciences, an institution steeped in Marxist-Leninist ideology. Surely here they would meet with some opposition and clash of ideas. The discussion started off amicably and Russian professors were interested in how to create a moral and just society. They wanted to talk about the failures of their society and shared their hopes and fears for the future.

After a few quiet and thoughtful minutes, a professor, however, stood up and started to speak and to stir things up. There was anger in what he said, unlike his colleagues. He rejected the idea of God and argued that God was not necessary for morality to exist. This man, a devoted communist, was seeing all of his beliefs being questioned and he sensed that the foundation blocks of his society were crumbling...to dust...and he was making a desperate effort to convince people to return to the basics of communism. He shouted at the delegates...denying that their ideas would ever work in Russian society. And when this angry professor finally stopped talking, the room was filled with an embarrassing silence. Who would answer this angry tirade? Would this whole discussion now degenerate into a shouting match? Was it possible for this Christian delegation to maintain its witness for Christ in the face of this man's intense anger.

Out of this Christian delegation, a man by the name of Kent Hill stood up cautiously to speak. Kent Hill is a professor in Russian studies and president of the Institute on Religion and Democracy in Washington. He spoke quietly and gently....telling this professor that he respected his right to his beliefs. He spoke of tolerance for all ideas - religious and atheistic. He affirmed that freedom of religion also included the freedom not to believe.

And then...in fluent Russian...Kent explained to his audience why he was a Christian. He told them that as a young man, he had been greatly influenced by the Russian novelist, Dostoevsky, and his book, The Brothers Karamazov. The book is about two brothers, Ivan, an agnostic, and Alyosha, a believer. When Kent first began reading he had agreed with Ivan and his arguments against God. But he could not help but be attracted by the character of Alyosha. Alyosha had a love in his heart that could not be argued away and in the end, that love overcame all of Ivan's arguments in Kent's mind.

They say that Kent Hill's loving response to the Russian professor ended the tension in the room and restored and reopened the channels of positive communication. If only all Christians could handle their emotions like Kent Hill...what a better world it would be! Love, remember, please...love is the distinguishing characteristic of the Christian.

LOVE IS THE MOST POWERFUL WEAPON

And that brings us to the final thing that needs to be said and taken in.

Love is Christ's most powerful weapon in the battle with the forces of darkness, discouragement, despair and death. As Jesus said,

"As I have loved you....so you must love another....."

Love is what Jesus was all about. Love was HOW Jesus would save the world. Love is the PATH that Christ took to "win back" persons like ourselves. It's the KEY to unlocking the door of the coldest heart....and that door has to be opened up from the inside.

Here's a story that you'll appreciate. Back in 1977, Bill Fero's aunt approached him about the possibility of housing a family of Vietnamese refugees. To her, it looked like the perfect solution...a perfect match...a perfect situation. Her nephew, Bill, was a bachelor who lived all alone in a spacious farmhouse. He had plenty of room. He also had a firsthand knowledge of Vietnam and its people, having served there in the War. And Bill's aunt Rose thought he might enjoy having some help around the farm, for Bill, you see, was disabled...having lost

both legs to a booby trap in Vietnam. But Aunt Rose could not have known what emotions her request would stir up in her nephew.

For the trauma of the war, combined with Bill's horrible injury, had left him quite bitter and angry. And over the years, he had developed a deep hatred for Vietnam and its people. So Bill's first instinct was to reject the plea of his Aunt Rose.

But then he had a delicious thought seize him. He could make the Vietnamese family suffer....just as he had suffered. He agreed to the request of his Aunt Rose and a week later the San Phi family moved in - father, mother and four children. Bill's plan went into action the very first morning and he began ordering the family around...making them do all the most grueling farm work.... children included. A kind word never passed from his lips, only insults and harsh demands. He was forcing the San Phi family into the role of personal servants. YET....no matter how demanding or how abusive Bill insisted on being, the San Phi family treated him with nothing but respect and kindness. Every menial task was done with cheerfulness and great efficiency. Oftentimes, they would do more work than Bill had assigned them to do. In a matter of months, the San Phi family had transformed Bill Fero's farm into the cleanest and the best organized farm in the area entire.

Then one day the family heard of an opportunity to join other relatives who had settled in California. As they departed, Bill, of course, set his sights on the next Vietnamese family to come and stay with him and work for him. Surely his constant, unreasonable demands and his humiliating treatment would make them suffer. But this family, too, worked long and hard hours and cheerfully, too, always repaying Bill's hatred with kindness. Soon, they, too, had to move on and then Bill took in the Chau family. One evening Mr. Chau told Bill Fero that the other refugee families had told them about him and Bill was sure that they had heard nothing but terrible ...horrible things, but Mr. Chau insisted that they all had liked him. However, they had been concerned with Bill's anger that kept coming through. As Mr. Chau said,

"They don't know why you don't enjoy life....." to which
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But the final incident that changed Bill's attitude occurred in March of 1979. He had long ignored his own birthday, but that year he couldn't ignore the stack of cards and gifts that came his way from the Vietnamese families that had passed through his home and farm. As Bill read the homemade cards that were filled with words of love and gratitude, he began to come apart...to cry. And the anger and hatred that he had carried so long slowly melted away.

Since that day in 1979, Bill's farmhouse has been a temporary home for more than forty Vietnamese men and women and children. And through them, Bill learned about the extreme poverty and lack of medical care available in Vietnam. He has made it his personal mission to visit medical supply companies and collect donations of medicine and supplies, which he then ships to Vietnam. He has even flown back to Vietnam a few times to distribute the supplies personally. Bill Fero's hatred for the Vietnamese has been replaced by a deep commitment and a genuine concern. The love of a few refugee families transformed him from a bitter man with no hope to a loving man with an energizing purpose! It's quite a story, reminding us that love can do that. It can unlock the coldest heart!

CLOSING THOUGHTS

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One wonders: how could they...or we...have missed the Gospel claims so badly? Jesus came to us and asked us...commanded us...to love one another. Love is the distinguishing mark...characteristic of the Christian. Love is Christ's most powerful weapon in the ongoing battle against darkness, despair and death. As that bumper sticker put it:

"Commit an unnatural act. Go out and love somebody!"

PRAYER

Make us sensitive to Your nearness and to Your presence in these moments, O God. Wrestle with us in the hidden corners of our lives where distrust and jealousy...anger and hatred...may be lurking. Bring us out...into the light of your love for all your children. In the spirit of Jesus who offers us these "love lessons", we now pray. Amen.

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