

Love Lessons

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There is a movie which I have seen, although I cannot recommend it, called Semi-Pro. It is an over-the-top comedy about a down-on-its-luck semi-professional basketball team called the Flint Michigan Tropics and their owner-player-coach Jackie Moon.

Jackie struggles to control the tempers and attitudes of his team of misfits who frequently break out into fights in the locker room. Jackie has a mantra of sorts. Painted on the wall of their dilapidated locker room. It says: “everybody love everybody.”

As much as he tries to enforce this ethos. It never works. Because—of course—you can’t make people love each other just by demand that they love each other.

Although it is an association that I would prefer to banish from my mind, I can’t help but be reminded of this movie every time I hear today’s scripture reading.

Where Jesus commands his disciples to love each other.

Today’s reading comes from a portion of John’s gospel called the “Farewell Discourse.” These are Jesus’ parting instructions to his disciples before his death. The capstone and culmination of his teaching to them.

He is teaching the disciples how to live once he is no longer walking the Earth by their side.

It is within the context of this speech that he makes his commandment.

“As God loved me, so I have loved you... this is my commandment, love one another, as I have loved you.”

Now thankfully, and not at all surprisingly, there is a crucial difference in Jesus commandment that we love one another.

His example.

Jesus is not just *telling* us that we have to love each other.

He is reminding us that he has *shown us how* to love each other.

We learn to love by example.

And Jesus puts himself right in the middle of this process:

I loved you the way God has loved me.

Now you love each other, the way I loved you.

His is not an abstract command, it is not a demand that we suddenly wrest control of our unruly hearts and force them to feel a certain way.

He is telling us to follow his example. We learn to love by example.

This farewell discourse of Jesus' is long, it spans several chapters in John's gospel. and it is easy to almost forget that the whole thing takes place right after Jesus has washed his disciples feet.

Before he launched into this discourse, he had knelt before his disciples, one by one cupping their dusty calloused feet in his hands. Washing them. Drying them.

It had been a simple act of care offered humbly and without hesitation. It was act of honoring the other without reference to status or station. Treating them not as servants, but as friends whom he himself could serve.

And it was with that dirty basin of water and crumpled towel still in the corner of the room, that Jesus said these words: "Love each other, as I have loved you."

"Love each other, as I have loved you."

To me that makes this command take on a whole new feeling. It is not Jesus insisting that we feel a certain way toward one another, it is Jesus insisting that we act a certain way toward one another.

"Love each other, as I have loved you."

There is nothing abstract about this love. It is a note tucked in the lunch of a stressed-out kid. It is the unrequested casserole left on the doorstep of a new mom. It is brushing the hair of a spouse, who these days sometimes doesn't even remember who you are.

"Love each other, just as I have loved you."

It is bearing with each other as we fumble and fail. It is listening through anger and disappointment. Loving each other, even when we are the hardest to love. Extending more grace to others than we feel they deserve.

Even if we don't want to.

Because we have been loved like that.

Jesus command is that we follow his example. That we extend the love to others, that he extends to us.

And we won't do it perfectly. That's why Jesus is Jesus, and we're, well... not Jesus.

But we have been given this example of gracious and abundant love. It is an example to us.

We learn how to love by example.

Today, on Mother's Day, I think about how many of us might point to mothers, or grandmothers, as people whose love has been an example to us. Who loved us into loving.

Or if not a mother, or a grandmother, we can likely each think of someone in our lives whose love has nurtured us into ones who can love others.

Who's love has been an example for you?

But the great news of our faith is that even if we were to have no person in our life to love us into loving, we all have God, we all have Christ, whose love for us is complete and exceeds our imagining.

A love that we can take as an example.
Because we learn how to love by example.

And one more thing...

Just as the example of others has shaped our love.

Our love will be an example to others.

In fact, the way we love may be our single most significant platform. The way we love may well be the most important way each one of us can shape the world.

The way we parent. The way we care for our parents. The way we live together in community. The way we treat perfect strangers. The way we care for our planet.

Right now, there are people who are learning how to love by the way that you love.

For whom is *your* love an example?

All our love is shaped by the example of those who have loved us, those people who have loved us, and our God who first loved us.

And our love shapes the love of others.

At first, I thought of this like a long chain. God loved Jesus, Jesus loves us, we love each other...

But with all the connections it is more like a web, with God at the very center. And each of us connected to that love, and connected by love to multitudes around us.

The ways we treat one another can make this web grow weaker. Or stronger.

The love we share is not just for the benefit of the ones we love, it is a way of witnessing to the love that we know,

it is a way of exemplifying what love can be for those around us.