

A sermon preached Maple Street Congregational Church, United Church of Christ
Danvers, MA
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Rev. Kevin M. Smith
Deuteronomy 34:1-12, (Matthew 22:34-40)

Powerful Love

In the early 1960s, the singing brothers known to us as the Everly Brothers recorded a song written by Boudleaux Bryant title “Love Hurts.” The opening lyrics are:

*Love hurts, love scars,
Love wounds, and marks,
Any heart, not tough,
Or strong, enough
To take a lot of pain,
Take a lot of pain
Love is like a cloud
Holds a lot of rain
Love hurts, ooh ooh love hurts*

The same song was later recorded by Roy Orbison and it became a huge rock and roll hit when the Scottish band “Nazareth” recorded it. How appropriate and with great synchronicity that a band named Nazareth would record a song whose lyrics speak of the tragedy of love and that this song would become such a big hit.

Love can indeed be tragic. The world seems to know a lot about tragic love. Just think about how many millions and millions of songs have been written about the tragedy of love and what two people who love each other can do to one another. By the way, the person who wrote the lyrics, Boudleaux Bryant, was a classically trained musician who loved country music and who, along with his wife, went on to write other songs about love including love of place, “Rocky Top,” about a Tennessee mountain home (I’m sure one of Jan Tipert’s favorite songs), and the other Everly Brothers hits, “All I Have to Do is Dream,” and “Bye, Bye Love,” which are two more songs about the yearning pain of love and lost love. I was raised on country music and my iPhone is full of country music. Country music just seems to aim straight for the heart and bring out memories of lost love and the poignant pain of loving someone. My Dad, who is with God and whom I loved very much used to love country music, too. The problem with my Dad, though, was that he was so cheap when he wanted to buy a country music album instead of going out and buying the latest Johnny Cash or Ernest Tubb or Marty Robbins album he would buy a cheap knock-off such a “Joe Schmo sings Ernest Tubb.” Really they used to produce records like that where some unnamed person who sounded just like the country music star would sing their songs. Now that’s cheap love.

Speaking of how painful love can be just look at poor Moses. After all Moses has had to put up with during his love affair with the one God, and after Moses has led his people

through the desert wilderness surviving near starvation and untold tragedies, God does not allow poor old Moses to enter into the promised land! Talk about unrequited love! Talk about being jilted at the altar! As we read this morning from the passage in Deuteronomy Moses gets left at the border—no immigration, legal or undocumented to the Promised Land for Moses. Now you might expect that kind of teasing in high school love stories, but not from the one and only God of the people of Israel. We can just hear old Moses singing those Everly Brother lyrics: Love hurts, love scars, Love wounds, and marks!

What kind of love is this that God gives us and demands from us? And the tragedy of Moses jilted at the border of the promised land is nothing compared to the suffering Jesus of Nazareth underwent all for the love of God—a God that was so intimate to him that he call God “Abba” or father. *Jesus loses his life for love: love of God and love of his neighbor*. There are lots of country and western songs about Jesus, too and rightly so because in so many ways it is a tragic story.

But, just what kind of love are we talking about when we deal with the stories of Moses and Jesus? Is it the love the Greeks call Eros? Eros love, of course, is, for the most part, the kind of love that we hear about in country music. Its romantic love, passion and yearning for something or someone you need. All of us know how much that kind of love can hurt. Some of us are still wearing scars from the lost and unrequited loves of our youth. We can still remember vividly the names and faces of our high school sweethearts and they jilted us or we jilted them. The really lucky ones of us are those that ended up marrying our high school sweethearts and stayed married to them. Those, my friends, are the folks—the folks who move beyond Eros love into the agape or phileo kinds of love combined with their Eros love.

Eros love is a kind of selfish love that has a tendency to focus on the needs of the self whether they are for sexual or emotional needs to have a partner. It's about passion and desire and satisfying one's own needs through another person. Agape and phileo love are about caring for other people or about friendship, respectively. They spring from a less selfish or self-centered place within our psyches and are focused outward on the needs of others or the group we in which we belong.

You see, my friends, the journey through the wilderness was never just about Moses—it was about a people and their relationship and responsibility to each other and to God. And the journey of and with Jesus is not just about Jesus of Nazareth. It's about creating bonds of love between people in order to experience the group's relationship with God and with the service to the world that God needs to have accomplished. We Jews, Muslims, and Christians and other people of faith, too, are God's instruments of agape and phileo love in the world existing here to heal the world or engage in *Tikkun Olam* as our Jewish sisters and brothers say. After yesterday's attack on the Good Jewish people of the Tree of Life synagogue we all must join with our Jewish sister's and brothers in healing a very broken world in which expressing hatred of neighbor is becoming the norm rather than the exception.

In the times of Moses and Jesus the focus was not on the needs or problems of the individual, it was on the group. Love was about fulfilling the group's needs and working to create a healthy group. Individual concerns and needs and fears and desires were secondary to the health and well-being of the group as a whole. And you know, sometimes in fulfilling the love of a group and service to God love is tough. Love can hurt—at least the love we know as the Eros kind of love can be left standing by the wayside.

You know, the one thing that most of know about relationships is that the really deep and discerning, insightful and integral love comes about once two people or a group get beyond the Eros love and enter into the agape and phileo love states. Those later states of love are where unselfishness and self-centeredness give way to finding joy in helping improve the welfare and health of the group. But, as we all know, sometimes it takes crises to move our psyches and hearts to the place where we can practice that kind of unselfish love and work to promote the well-being of the group at the expense of the individual. Unfortunately, in our society and culture today, there has been so much focus on the needs of the individual at the expense of the group. “Have it your way” is not a just a motto describing the latest kind of hamburger—it's a prescription for the kind of greed and selfishness that has led us into the kind of political mess the world is now experiencing.

I think the the most important lesson that we can take from Moses looking but not getting into the promised land and Jesus hanging on the cross is that we need to be kind of unselfish people that puts the needs of the group first and realize that all the good works we do and the service we give to the group may not bear fruit in our lifetime or be visible to us in the present and may never be seen by our eyes. All of the hard work and blood, sweat, and tears may not come to joyful fulfillment until long after we have gone. What better love than that—the kind of love that you can give without expecting reward. That is the great commandment that Jesus taught us when he said “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.’ This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets. (Mt. 22:37-40).” Serve people. Love people. Spread God's love. That is the job of the church and humankind. Amen.

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