

February 3, 2019
“The Greatest Gift”
(edited for publication)

“When one has once fully entered the realm of love, the world — no matter how imperfect — becomes rich and beautiful, it consists solely of opportunities for love.”

— Søren Kierkegaard, Works of Love

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Someone asked me recently about this passage and the older English versions of it, which use the word “charity” rather than “love.” Many of us have heard this familiar passage used at weddings and at memorial services, in which the closing verse read as follows: “And now abideth faith, hope, charity, these three; but the greatest of these is charity.” As I’ve explained to others on occasion, the word “charity” in its older usage usually referred to one of the seven virtues, along with the six other so-called heavenly virtues:

- [Chastity](#)
- [Diligence](#)
- [Humility](#)
- [Kindness](#)
- [Patience](#)
- [Temperance](#)

Sometimes in the New Testament, if you’re taking notes, the words charity and love are used interchangeably in the King James Version of the 17th century. Later, however, there came to be a finer distinction in the translation of the several words that refer to love of the several sorts, so that the word rendered love in our reading

for this morning came to be understood, as is now the case, as referring to an ethical stance, rather than an emotional state. (Spirituality, let me remind you, is an ethical state.) This *agape* love has been described in many ways, most often as “unconditional” love, that love God has given us without let or hindrance.

Let me illustrate, with something from one of our forebearers in the faith, part of a sermon from the heart and pen of John Wesley, that great 18th century revivalist and reformer and co-founder of what is now the Methodist Church. In a part of his sermon on the Beatitudes, which ended up being mostly about love, he said, ““Charity,” or love, (as it were to be wished it had been rendered throughout, being a far plainer and less ambiguous word),, and here Wesley who was no mean biblical scholar, states his preference for the use of the word love rather than charity, on the grounds that it gets to the heart of the love business much more clearly than charity. We still tend to think of “charity” as something we do when we make a donation to any of a number of organizations such as the Red Cross, or GWIM, or the United Way. He is getting at what I mentioned a moment ago, namely the core ethical dimension of this biblical love, and he illustrates it further as he launches near the end of this long sermon into a diatribe we don’t hear much anymore, and by this time he’s got his congregation wound up and ready for the blow-off, and I beg your pardon if this is a bit much to bear, but it’s worth remembering that once upon a time, sermons tended to be on the long side. The portion I am giving you is only a small part of a much-longer sermon. He wrote and spoke:

“For a little while you may say, “Woe is me, that I” am constrained to “dwell with Mesech, and to have my habitation among the tents of Kedar!” You may pour out your soul, and bemoan

the loss of true, genuine love in the earth: Lost indeed! You may well say, (but not in the ancient sense,) "See how these Christians love one another!" These Christian kingdoms, that are tearing out each other's bowels, desolating one another with fire and sword! These Christian armies, that are sending each by thousands, by ten thousands, quick into hell! These Christian nations, that are all on fire with intestine broils, party against party, faction against faction! These Christian cities, where deceit and fraud, oppression and wrong, yea, robbery and murder, go not out of their streets! These Christian families, torn asunder with envy, jealousy, anger, domestic jars, without number, without end! Yea, what is most dreadful, most to be lamented of all, these Christian Churches! --Churches that bear the name of Christ, the Prince of Peace, and wage continual war with each other! That convert sinners by burning them alive! That are "drunk with the blood of the saints!" -- Does this praise belong only to "Babylon the Great, the mother of harlots and abominations of the earth?" Nay, verily; but Reformed Churches (so called) have fairly learned to tread in her steps. Protestant Churches too know to persecute, when they have power in their hands, even unto blood. And, meanwhile, how do they also anathematize each other! Devote each other to the nethermost hell! What wrath, what contention, what malice, what bitterness, is everywhere found among them, even where they agree in essentials, and only differ in opinions, or in the circumstantial of religion! Who follows after only the "things that make for peace, and things wherewith one may edify another?" O God! how long? Shall thy promise fail? Fear it not, ye little flock! Against hope, believe in hope! It is your Father's good pleasure yet to renew the face of the earth. Surely all these things shall come to an end, and the inhabitants of the earth shall learn righteousness. "Nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they

know war any more." "The mountains of the Lord's house shall be established on the top of the mountains;" and "all the kingdoms of the earth shall become the kingdoms of our God." "They shall not" then "hurt or destroy in all his holy mountain;" but they shall call their "walls salvation, and their gates praise." They shall all be without spot or blemish, loving one another, even as Christ hath loved us. -- Be thou part of the first-fruits, if the harvest is not yet. Do thou love thy neighbor as thyself. The Lord God fill thy heart with such a love to every soul, that thou mayest be ready to lay down thy life for his sake! May thy soul continually overflow with love, swallowing up every unkind and unholy temper, till he calleth thee up into the region of love, there to reign with him for ever and ever!

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We rightly and justly can say not only “Amen, but “whew!” at the end of that, but his point is well made...namely, the love expressed by Paul, displayed and taught over and over again by the man from Nazareth by Jesus, lifted up in the early church, in the words Wesley quotes: “see how these Christians love one another!”, taught as the greatest of the virtues in the middle ages and on, preached on and taught in our time over and over again by prophets great and small, this love is truly the greatest, greater than our ability to believe, for where there is no belief, love will break through, for it is by such love that God loved us and desires us, as in God so loved the world, and where there is no hope, love will lift up the hopeless.

What Wesley hammers on in this sermon is the ethical dimension of Christian love, the state of being and living **as if what we did mattered infinitely more than what we thought, or said.** He and others in his day looked around at the state of the universal

church of Christ and saw division and discord, and he was concerned primarily to lay into the grievous religious divisions of his day, and in our day the state of public religion is still as grievous as then.

Wesley understood the gift of faith by virtue of the gift of the love of God to be a public faith which addressed the needs of the public in which he lived and worked. The religious divisions of his day he saw as inimical to the well-being socially and economically and religiously of the folk of the land, the farmers and shopkeepers, the laborers in the factories of the new industrial age of the burgeoning cities. The lack of the love of God weighed heavily on them, and for Wesley, their cries went up to the God of love for justice and mercy.

If we are to address the public needs of our public faith, we must begin to grasp and exercise this Christian love, what some have called “big people love,” adult love, love lived out and practiced by grown-ups, and this will mean some serious work and serious discernment on our part, about our place in our community, within our association and conference, and our willingness to honor our covenant.

We are preparing shortly formally to begin our new year of life and faith, and I trust that we will all begin it with this one thing in mind. The Greatest Gift of all, the gift of love, is what will not only sustain us in the days and weeks and months ahead, but this gift will do far more than sustain us. It will inspire us as we look around us at our world now, in 2019 for new ways to do the love of God in Jesus Christ. To that end, I can do no better than to repeat Wesley’s closing words:

“May thy soul continually overflow with love, swallowing up every unkind and unholy temper, till he calleth thee up into the region of love, there to reign with him for ever and ever!”

Amen.