
Blind Love
Sydenham-Heritage United Church
May 9, 2021
by Rev. Dr. Paul Shepherd

Based on Acts 8:26-40 and 1 John 4:7-21

“We love because God first loved us. Those who say, ‘I love God’, and hate their brothers or sisters, are liars. For those who do not love a brother or sister whom they have seen, cannot love God whom they have not seen. The commandment we have from God is this: those who love God must love their brothers and sisters also.” Got it? There is surely nothing more to say. After all, Jane spoke about this text last week. Let’s go for coffee right now!

But perhaps we need to unpack a couple of things first. Starting off, I hope that you were not confused by the “1” in front of the word “John”. Those words were not from the Gospel of John, but rather, from the first epistle of John. Which means that the words are not about the life of Jesus, but are words of encouragement written to an early Christian congregation. And so it is no surprise that the text goes on at length about the need to love each other. Perhaps the congregation John was writing to had just finished their Annual Meeting. Perhaps the author figured that the congregation needed to be reminded that what holds them together is their love for one another. Sometimes in a congregation, loving Jesus isn't enough. We have to love each other too.

But I need to point out that this text expresses something that I simply cannot believe. Like, at all. The text says that if we don’t love our brothers and sisters - people that we have seen and that we know well - then we cannot love God who we have not seen. Well, I’m sorry, but I just can’t wrap my mind around that. Here’s why.

I invite each of us to take a moment and to put our minds back in time. I invite you to remember - in your own way - your first “crush” on someone. Because a crush is essentially falling in love with someone you do not actually know. Usually it's someone you never get to know. Many school crushes are like that. We say that two people fall in love, and I know that’s how it feels for the people involved. However, with a crush the people fall in love with an image of the other person. An image that bears very little

resemblance with the actual person. Sometimes, what people actually fall in love with is just the idea of being in love. With a crush, you hold your partner up on a pedestal, and see the image that you yourself have created. You don't actually see the other person properly. And that's a wonderful feeling. For awhile. But if the relationship lasts long enough, it falls apart. It falls off the rails because the person's actual personality starts to emerge. And the real person just cannot compete with the image that was created by the other person.

My point is, it is actually very easy to fall in love with what we do not know.

So I'm not just sure what the author of 1 John is driving at. When he says, "if you cannot love the people you see, you cannot love God who you don't see". The unknown is often far easier to love because we actually love an invented image that we create ourselves. And we fill that image with attributes that we love. It's very easy to fall in love with someone we don't know. Blind love happens all the time. Perhaps the author of 1 John never had a crush himself.

One of the joys of ministry is doing weddings. I have never performed a wedding for a really young couple. But I have heard from minister friends that these weddings are terrible, from a pastoral point of view. When I help a couple prepare for marriage, part of the conversation with the couple has to discuss potential issues and struggles that the couple might face. I usually meet couples at least 3 times, which gives me the opportunity to give them feedback on how I see them treating each other during those meetings. Those conversations can be very interesting. But with young couples (I've been told) you just can not have that conversation because the couple are just so "in love" that they can't even imagine any issues or struggles. Or if they can, they simply know that their love is stronger than any problem they might face. And on those occasions, the minister is not even capable of shattering that illusion. Personally, I see blind love as a gift from God that should be enjoyed. And I am not discouraging it. But blind love - by itself - is no basis for a long-term relationship.

Not only is it easy to love something you don't really know, but it is also easy to hate something that you don't really know. That's how racism works of course. Racism is a hatred for a person, or a people, we don't even know. It's like a crush - only backwards.

We invent a false image of the other person, fill that image with things that we hate, and then believe that our hatred of the other person is justified. Of course, what we hate is really the image that we have created ourselves. And like with a crush, the mental image we created usually bears very little resemblance to the actual person. Our hatreds say much more about us than they say about the other person.

I do not want to dwell today on the topic of blind hatred, because we see this all around us. We can make our own list of blind hatreds. Racism, sexism, bigotry, Islamaphobia, homophobia, misogyny, xenophobia. I could continue of course. And in many ways, all of those expressions of hatred boil down to the fact that we seem to like to label people. We like to label people as either “like us”, or “not like us and therefore wrong”. And the many labels we have are because we create so many dividing lines we can use to separate ourselves from others. Gender, sexuality, race, religion, age, employment status, marital status, economic status. I could continue of course.

We might wonder how blind hatred can exist in the modern world at all. Are we not all educated and open-minded people? Surely, people like us are not put off by the colour of someone’s skin, or the fact that they dress differently than we do? That a question I really want to get answers to!

In spite of the pandemic I have made some inroads onto committees here in Brantford. I am a member of the Anti-Discrimination Table that is part of the Brantford Immigration Partnership structure. The anti-discrimination table has only been meeting for about 6 months. At that table, I am looking particularly to get a sense of what discrimination looks like here in Brantford, and what we can do to move that conversation forward. We have very good conversations actually. Over time, I will share insights that come from that table. The principle work at the moment is identifying and working to remove barriers between people through education. The table is open to agencies (like churches, job placement agencies, etc) but also to residents. If you’d like to participate on that table, I can hook you up.

What can we do to reduce barriers between people? Here are 3 practical ideas, all based on the teachings of Jesus.

First of all, all of those “isms”, like racism, are based on blind hatred. But blind

hatred is always based on fear - fear of the unknown. When I see people exhibiting hatred, I like to ask those people what exactly they are afraid of. People think that hatred is a sign of their own strength. People think that fear is a sign of weakness. So if you can help someone realize that their hatred is actually based on their fear, they often back off completely. Sometimes in shame. Try this experiment yourself. The next time you see someone on TV yelling at you to hate somebody, picture them as a scared, petulant child and you might even feel deep sympathy for them. Donald Trump was the poster-child for taking his own insecurities and fears and projecting them into hatred of others. Sadly, he didn't invent the technique.

Secondly, if hatred is based on a fear of the unknown, then the obvious “cure” for that hatred is to change the unknown into the known. Go out of your way to meet and chat with people who are part of groups that you hate. I have been very surprised and disappointed with the level of hatred and fear that comes to the surface around what women wear - particularly, face coverings. And I struggle to understand why men want to tell women what they can or cannot wear.

One fear we need to recognize and avoid is Islamaphobia - fear of Muslims. This topic often gets blended in with the issue of men telling women what to wear. You may remember that in 2016, many towns in France banned women wearing “burkinis” on beaches. The stated reason for banning burkinis was that they violated some local laws. But compare these images:

[images: burkini vs nun]

[image: burkini vs wetsuit]

[image: hijab vs judge]

We need to realize that the only people that police have been harassing over these bans are Muslims. The ban - of course - has nothing to do with decency, and certainly nothing to do with women's rights.

[image: niqab]

When we get to know what we fear, we usually can stop living in fear. How many

of us have spoken to a woman wearing a niqab - a face covering that only reveals the person's eyes? I perhaps speak to someone wearing a niqab about once a month. And I will admit to you (even though I am not proud of this) that the first time I spoke with a person in a niqab, I did feel a bit strange - for about 3 seconds. After that, my own fears dissipated completely. If you are afraid of women in any sort of unfamiliar clothing, just go and strike up a conversation with a few of them. And I suspect your own fears will evaporate too. It turns out that - after all - people are people. Perhaps that's why Jesus said - over and over - be not afraid.

That is what we learn in our reading from Acts today too - the reading about the baptism of the Ethiopian eunuch. The man would have been shunned by the local Jewish community for very traditional reasons. The man was a foreigner. The man had had his genitals altered. The man was black-skinned. He was what the Bible calls "unfit to enter the temple of the Lord". And yet, the spirit tells Phillip to simply go and talk to the man. The spirit didn't seem to have any of the prejudices that would have excluded the man. The man was spoken to, listened to, embraced, welcomed, and then baptized. Once Phillip got to know the man, there were no problems at all. All are welcome in God's family. Of course, the fact that the story is included in the Book of Acts tells us that the inclusion of strange people was radical. It was exceptional. Otherwise, the story would likely not have been recorded at all. Inclusion is a lesson we are still learning today.

So that's two ways to deal with our biases. What is a third way? But first, did anyone figure out this week's graphic? It's "love" in braille.

A third way to deal with our own biases is to have a deep desire to find God in our midst. And to realize that we encounter God through other people, including strangers, foreigners, and people considered "unfit to enter the temple of the Lord". As it says in Hebrews, "Do not forget to show hospitality to strangers, for by so doing some people have shown hospitality to angels without knowing it." If we believe that all people are children of God, then obviously embracing strangers is a great way to meet God in our midst. Mahatma Gandhi took this a step further saying, "If you don't find God in the next person you meet, it is a waste of your time looking any further". It's not a waste of time because God is not present. It is a waste of time because if you can overlook seeing God

in any one person, you probably won't have any better luck with the next person.

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Amen.