
If love is the answer ... what is the question?
Sydenham-Heritage United Church
Sept 25, 2022
by Rev. Dr. Paul Shepherd

Based on Matthew 6:25-33

Ah love. What a great topic to preach on. Even Rev. Paul can't mess this up. Unless of course he insists on having us discuss what love actually is. I mean, that might be a bit inconvenient. Or even worse, what does love look like in our own lives. Or he might even want to connect the word "love" with stewardship.

[image: reality mode off]

But cheer up. I do not plan to engage reality mode. At least not right away. In fact, I wanted to open with the question, "Is love a fancy or a feeling?"

"Is love a fancy, or a feeling? No, it is immortal as immaculate truth. 'Tis not a blossom, shed as soon as youth drops from the stem of life - for it will grow, in barren regions, where no waters flow nor ray of promise cheats the pensive gloom. A darkling fire, faint hovering o'er a tomb, that but itself and darkness nought doth shew, is my love's being, - yet it cannot die, nor will it change, though all be changed beside; tho' fairest beauty be no longer fair, tho' vows be false, and faith itself deny, tho' sharp enjoyment be a suicide, and hope a spectre in a ruin bare."

[image: sense and sensibility dvd]

Until recently, I thought that the question "Is love a fancy or a feeling" was from the 1995 movie, "Sense and Sensibility". But the sonnet I just read was written by Hartley Coleridge in 1833, 22 years after the novel "Sense and Sensibility" was written.

[image: Emma thompson is love a fancy]

And like many things written a long time ago, Sometimes I struggle to understand the intention of the words. Or in this case, even the title. "Is love a fancy or a feeling?" confuses me. Isn't a fancy actually already a feeling? But the words of the poem indicate something deeper. Something more permanent. Something related to truth. Something that we might care deeply about.

[image: love is blind]

I know it is autumn, but love is in the air. Yesterday, we had a beautiful wedding in this very sanctuary. A true celebration of love. And as usual, I shared a short reflection on the value of love in the context of marriage. If you'd like to hear that reflection, you just have to get married yourself. But the very short version is that love - at least in the context of marriage - is not a feeling. And it is certainly not a fancy. Love is a decision. In the context of marriage, love is a decision that we get to make every day. Or in some cases, we get to make that decision every 5 minutes.

[image: love cats]

This week, we have another guest in our midst. And expert on love. Terry, come on down!

Paul: Terry, I'm curious what you think love is and how you see it expressed. I know you have a great story share.

Thank you Terry.

[image: love eyeball]

This week - actually for awhile now - I've been thinking about love in the context of community. I mean community in general. I've been reflecting on this congregation as community, as well as on the wider community of Brantford.

This week I participated in a Belonging Brant workshop. Belonging Brant gave us a presentation in worship a little while ago. They focus on community development, with a particular focus of including all people, particularly people living with mental health conditions and other special circumstances.

[image: hug cat and dog]

The presentation outlined - in general terms - how societies have been evolving. And you can decide for yourself to what extent churches have followed the same evolutionary trajectory.

Stage 1: Characterized by the rise of institutions as places where society decided to put people who had mental health needs. Now to be fair, as a society we had to learn about people living with different mental health conditions. We had to start somewhere. And institutions were one way to learn, explore, and try different solutions. But at the same time, these institutions became places that divided and separated people.

Institutions did provide valuable functions. But at the cost of separating people in those institutions from the rest of society. I am painting with a broad brush here. Institutions have evolved over time of course.

For example, from the CAMH web site, “In many ways, the history of the Queen Street West site and its physical evolution are the history of mental health care in Canada. The address has been home to a mental health facility for over 160 years, since the opening of the Provincial Lunatic Asylum in 1850 to house patients in often difficult conditions.

The changing view of mental health can be seen in the institution's various name changes over the years.” In 1850 it was called the Provincial Lunatic Asylum. In 1871 it was renamed Asylum for the Insane. In 1905 it became Hospital for the Insane. In 1919 it was simply Ontario Hospital, Toronto. In 1996, it became Queen Street Mental Health Centre and finally in 1998, it became the Centre for Addiction and Mental Health (CAMH).¹

So - stage 1 was dominated by institutions.

[image: cow hug 1]

Stage 2 is characterized by care centres and homes. These were effectively smaller institutions. Homes are often actual homes, and therefore geographically already integrated into our own communities. This greatly lowered the barriers between “us” and “them”. But there were still barriers. And often the control of these homes was still done at a regional or a provincial level. There was often not much attention paid to the individual needs of the individuals in question. Plus any time you collect a common group of people together, you are at risk of creating a ghetto, which is its own barrier.

So what is stage 3? I’m glad you asked. The vision in the workshop is that stage 3 is where the focus is on inclusion and lifting up local voices. There is a real interest now in having more control at a neighbourhood level. And that the needs of individuals are best met by listening to the voices of those individuals and designing custom programs that work for them as individuals.

¹ <https://www.camh.ca/en/driving-change/building-the-mental-health-facility-of-the-future/history-of-queen-street-site>

[image: pigs in love]

More and more I am hearing that an inclusive, neighbourhood approach is being recommended for solving all sorts of social problems, including homelessness and loneliness.

Now I know that was a very brief overview. But I need to ask you. Where do you see the church fitting into this? And in particular, if we are motivated by love, where do we want to fit into this.

Certainly if we look back into our distant past, churches were definitely seen as institutions. We dispensed answers. We managed truth. We provided security to people by dispensing salvation. But we also created barriers - both to non-Christians and to the “wrong” type of Christian.

That is of course ancient history. So what stage are we in today?

[image: hugging a pig]

Stephen Parsons, a retired Anglican priest shares a challenging observation that many churches are stuck in Stage 2. Meaning that they are actually ghettos. I quote from his web site, “Surviving Church”.

“It occurred to me that the Church has a [parallel] problem. We create enclaves for people to feel comfortable with particular expressions of God-talk. [These people] belong in that enclave and, as long as they remain there, they feel safe. The question for the Church is whether the belonging/sharing/community has created something resembling a ghetto. Are we so wrapped up in our versions of truth and reality that we find it difficult to move to engage with what other people, [even] other Christians, are saying? The answer to this question has to be yes. So much of the language we use in Church situations is totally incomprehensible to other people. Many churches are founded on the teaching of a particular preacher and the congregation are in a state of thrall to [their] personality. The greater the attraction to what Pastor So and So or Father X is saying, the more disconnected these Christians are [becoming], not only with the rest of society, but also with other Christians.

[image: cow hug 2]

The key word in this discussion about enclaves and ghettos is the word safety.

People want desperately to feel safe. The problem is that the desire for safety overrides other more important values that Christianity is presenting to us. Our desire for safety, which is another word for salvation, has to be balanced with the sayings of Jesus about losing our life in order to find it. In short Jesus does not want us to spend our whole lives chasing the parts of belief that enable us to feel comfortable and safe. [Jesus] would rather we left this desire to feel safe behind and begin to explore newness. Newness will always involve some discomfort whether in terms of mental challenge or meeting the demands of the future.”²

What do you think? Is Sydenham-Heritage United Church a ghetto composed of the people who are already known to us? Or are we yearning and working and building towards newness. Newness that invites us into new and inclusive relationships in our neighbourhood? Let’s talk about that over coffee time today.

[image: money does not buy happiness. But it does help you look for it in more places.]

I suppose I should touch on the actual stewardship topic for this week, which is about giving with intention and love. The UCC materials direct me to tell you that all people can always give more than they are currently giving. Well, that’s true of course. All of us - including me - can give a bit more in terms of time, talent, and treasure. The UCC materials state that that is what Jesus did. I’m not sure that’s true though. For one thing, Jesus did not have to plan for his retirement. Jesus could live in the moment financially in a way that is not really practical for any of us.

I have heard some people say that because SHUC has assets from the sale of the Heritage building, they they are less interested in contributing financially to the church at this time. And I understand that. But the larger conversation is about - who are we? And where do we want to be in five years. Or in plane English - what does love look like in our community? And how to we want to help bring that love to life. Because in a very real sense, money is not our problem. In fact - as a society - money is never the problem.

The biblical version of this is what we read earlier from Matthew, “Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more than food, and the body more than

² <http://survivingchurch.org/2019/07/08/when-churches-become-ghettos/>

clothing? Look at the birds of the air; they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they?" Jesus - in the sermon on the mount - tells us not to worry about stuff. And therefore not to worry about money.

There is a non-biblical version of this story too. And it comes from covid.

[image: earth]

We sometimes say that globally, we should end poverty. Estimates place the cost of ending poverty at

[image: \$175 billion / year to end poverty]

\$175 billion per year. We also talk about providing clean drinking water to every person.

Estimates place the cost of providing clean drinking water at

[image: \$150 billion / year for clean water]

\$150 billion per year. So in order to both end poverty and provide every human being with access to drinking water, we need

[image: \$325 billion / year for poverty and water]

\$325 billion per year. As a society what have we said about that idea? We say, well, that's just impossible isn't it, I mean, we can't afford that. That's ridiculous. No-one can expect us to find that sort of money.

[image: covid \$24 trillion]

And then, along came covid. The estimates of the global cost of covid vary quite a bit, but I present an estimate that in the past 2.5 years covid has cost us - globally - \$24 trillion. And that money has been found.

[image: can't find \$325 billion / year for poverty and clean water]

To put that in perspective, we decided we could not afford \$325 billion per year to solve poverty and drinking water problems. But we have spent

[image: we spend \$325 billion every 12.4 days on covid]

\$325 billion on covid every 12.4 days. The problem is never money. The problem is simply our priorities. The problem is our decisions. The problem is what do we love.

[image: roof video]

On a smaller scale, it's like the story of the church that had a roof that was

leaking. And the minister stands up on a Sunday morning and says. I'm sorry to tell you that our roof is leaking. And I have good news and bad news. The good news is that we do have the money to fix the roof. The bad news is, that money is in your pockets.

"Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing? Look at the birds of the air; they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they?"

[image: brantford]

Is love a fancy or a feeling? It is definitely a decision. Love is a decision we get to make every day. What sort of community do we want to build? Here's a clue. What sort of community do we want to live in? Because that is what we will get.

I'd like to close by describing what love looks like when we express it in our community here @ SHUC and on our streets. But, I'm not going to do that. I'm not going to tell you in words. Instead, you and I and other people we have not met yet are just going to live it - together.

Let's Live love.

Amen.