

Matthew 22:36-40 + Ephesians 3:14-7; 5:1-2

Love in the Ruins

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It's all about love. I am certain that for many ears that sounds simplistic and sentimental. Yet, the truth is that the heart of Christianity is love, beginning with God who is love. There is nothing simplistic or sentimental about this love. After all, this God-who-is-love became human in Jesus to live among us, to heal our deep estrangement and by his death and resurrection restore us to our original purpose in God-who-is-love. The cross of Christ is the emblem of our God's vulnerable self-giving love. So let's be clear: it's all about love, from the beginning all the way to the end. The love of God-for-us is poured out completely for the utterly astonishing purpose that we will live as the beloved of God day-by-day. Amazing grace, indeed!

No prayer is richer than the one Saint Paul prayed for the little community in Ephesus:

**That Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith, so that,
because you have been rooted and grounded in love,
you may be able to comprehend with all the saints
what is the breadth and length and height and depth,
and thus to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge,
so that you may be filled up to all the fullness of God.**

SLIDE The image is a people rooted and grounded in love, like sturdy plants, overflowing with the fullness of God in our lives. If you are looking to pray for someone, I suggest this prayer.

When asked what matters most, Jesus replied from the heart of Judaism: love God with your entire being and love your neighbor as yourself. He took this vision in an even more radical direction, telling his followers: love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you. We can't fathom the nature of this love, but we know it can't be merely sentimental or easy. After all, Jesus was crucified because he loved the ungodly. "Love in dreams is easy," said Dostoevsky, "love in practice is often harsh and dreadful." Jesus shows us what this costly love means by the way in which he treated those considered outcasts, sought after the lost, welcomed the children, embraced the poor and called the most unlikely people to follow him. It's all about love. One cannot escape it.

So let me say again, the Christian faith declares that the love of God has been poured out upon us, for the singular purpose that we will experience fully this love. You are the beloved! As a consequence, we love others with the same radical love of Jesus - for neighbor, stranger, ourselves and even our enemies. It's all about love.

Since we are on the threshold of celebrating the birth of this country, I want to say few words about what this talk of love this might mean for Christian practice at this time. To state the obvious: America is not a Christian nation. It has never been a Christian nation. That is both an historical fact and a theological commentary on the flawed character of this country. No nation is without serious flaws that must be corrected. This nation is no exception. America remains what Alexis de Tocqueville famously praised as a **glorious experiment in democracy**. The experiment is being sorely tested right now and there is no guarantee that it will survive. Tocqueville was adamant that the practice of engaged citizenship is what keeps democracy from sliding into authoritarian rule. Without this thoughtful critical engagement, the nation will not survive as the welcoming beacon described by Emma Lazarus on the Statue of Liberty:

**“Keep, ancient lands, your storied pomp!” cries she
With silent lips.**

**“Give me your tired, your poor,
Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free,
The wretched refuse of your teeming shore.
Send these, the homeless, tempest-tossed to me,
I lift my lamp beside the golden door!”**

I love the way Norman Rockwell depicted the golden rule as an expression of the best of America. (See slide here)

Biblically speaking, what Christians have to offer to any nation is love for others that comes from being rooted and grounded in the love of Christ. As people who know God’s love for all people - sinners as we are - all we have to offer is love. And that is what we are called to practice at all times in all places.

This is why every act or speech that degrades a human being is a violation of the love of God. When people are referred to as an infestation on the border, Christians are called to denounce such speech because we know any speech that demeans a human being offends God-who-is-love. We have a zero-tolerance policy on vulgar speech.

Biblically speaking, any act that forcibly separates a child from his or her parents is an affront to the love of God. This is not about law or public policy, it is about human beings who are created in the image of God and thus are to be always treated with dignity and respect. Love is what we have to offer a nation on the edge of extinction as a democracy. Reinhold Niebuhr once said **Justice is the form of love** embodied in society.

This is why Christians, being are rooted and grounded in God’s love, must resist nefarious ungodly actions that violate human dignity, deny our common humanity and insult God who came to us in love that we might know this love in our life together. The resistance that Christians bring to bear upon the government is an expression of the love that God has poured out upon us, that all people may know love and give praise and honor to God

alone. Love is our contribution to the experiment in democracy that it may flourish once again.

To be God alone be the glory, now and forever. Amen.