

No Strings Attached

June 20, 2021

We were talking about old Disney movies for some reason last week, and I recalled taking our daughter when she was very young to one of her first big screen movies, the animated Beauty and the Beast.

That story, based on an old fairy tale, had a message for people of all ages.

If you remember, it was summed up in the gripping scene where the scary Beast, who had captured Belle, was about to confess his love to her, and if he does that a spell will be broken which has held the whole castle in a cloud of doom.

But just then, Belle sees an image of her Father, who is in trouble. She cries out "I must go to him"

"Go to him then", the Beast says quietly.

As she leaves the others in the castle also under the darkness come and see if he has broken the curse. "I let her go" he confesses.

"WHY would you do that?" They can't believe it.

They sense the impact of his decision. In this fairy tale, they would be plunged into another season of darkness and despair. It meant he may have forfeited his last chance of being loved. But he let her go. Why?

"I had to," he explained. "I loved her".

He had finally learned what it was like to truly love, without an agenda, without a transaction, with no strings attached, without thinking of himself.

Love with no strings attached.

Paul talks about selfless love in his famous passage in 1 Corinthians 13:

Love is patient and kind

Love is not envious or boastful or arrogant

It does not insist on its own way

It is not irritable or resentful.

It does not rejoice in wrongdoing but rejoices in truth

It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.

Love never ends.

The make-believe story of the Beast tells us about love as the New Testament describes it, the kind of love that God in Christ has for us, the kind of love with no strings attached, the kind of love that does not ask what we will gain from it.

I wanted to focus on Philippians for these past two weeks to look closer at the apostle Paul, and some of his inspiration in times of crisis. Last week we saw him exhorting all to press on toward the goal, and in this chapter he defines the kind of love which will help us get there..

SO three concepts from this chapter of Philippians:

First, once again, Paul's theme is to make God in Christ our number one priority in life. This is the goal. Our goal if you will. Christ, The one who is in all and through all and above all.

We know in this letter, Paul writes from prison, faces an uncertain future, yet the letter flows with selfless love.

Such a great love he has for this church in Philippi, he fills these chapters with joy. He repeats his key phrase, "in Christ."

A scholar counted 132 times in the Pauline canon of the Bible in which he refers to being "in Christ" or in the Lord. It punctuates all of his letters.

He is reminding these young followers of Jesus that the only way to love selflessly without an agenda is to be connected to the one who loves unconditionally.

On this Father's Day we are reminded of the love we have for our parents, or as parents the priority we have to care for our children, and the blessing that they are. And that is so important.

Paul is saying as important as all of that is, the Bible's teaching is being in Christ is our number one priority. Paul says unless you do that, ALL of our relationships - family, friends, co-workers, etc have a risk of being distorted by expectations of what is in it for us.

It is true in all kinds of relationships. Parent, marriage, co-worker, make your goal to be In Christ and all these other relationships in life will flourish.

SECOND if we are to love selflessly, begin to see things from another's point of view. We have probably all heard this advice before. But Paul really sets a concrete example of that principle in this writing and by doing that, urges his church in Philippi to look at life in that new way.

It is this story of Epaphroditus, a little-known person in the New Testament who had apparently been sent by the church in Philippi to help Paul while he was in prison.

But here was the problem. Epaphroditus was becoming ill, near death, and Paul saw that he needed to go back to care for himself. SO Paul begins to see the

situation not through his own needs, but through the eyes of his friend and helper, Epaphroditus.

He realizes if he returns, people will talk. They will ask why. They will come up with conspiracy theories. They will not trust him. They will say he was a quitter, he abandoned his mission.

So a huge part of this letter, which ends up being in Scripture is Paul writing in this second chapter about Epaphroditus. That he was not a failure. He loved Paul to the end, and it was Paul's insistence that he return.

See the difference?

Instead of looking at his friend for what he could do for Paul, he saw the situation unfolding from his friend's point of view.

If you are old enough, you would remember the great basketball player for the Boston Celtics, Bill Russell. He used to talk about how his team won 11 NBA titles.

And he said, they just cared about each other. It didn't matter who scored the points.

And then he shared a secret which he had not shared until his retirement. He said during practice, I practiced every play from the position of every other player on the floor.

The coach allowed me to bring the ball down the floor. He allowed me to play the small forward, and the position of shooting guard. And I ran each play as if I were them.

Why would you do that?

Well, he said, I used to get mad at the other players. But as soon as I ran the play from their point of view, I realized what they were up against. I could see what I could do to make the play work, and make it easier for them.

Wouldn't that be great spiritual advice for our communities, our nation, even perhaps in some cases our family relationships? To set aside assumptions and begin to see life from their point of view.

It is exactly what some have been doing since the George Floyd murder in race relations. We are asking ourselves, what is truly the experience of minorities in our country? How do they experience our legal system and enforcement practices? It is what seeing something from another set of eyes can do.

Paul says you will always have a little bit of your own agenda attached, unless you can begin to look at life from someone else point of view.

AS we see our country become so divided, with people in their information silos, our world is becoming desperate for this kind of love to take hold.

THIRD Paul says let your love be a platform. Secure and stable.

That's how Paul treated his friend. With his life in question, I am sure Paul would much rather have his friend alongside of him. But Paul uses his love not to capture another's attention and care, but as a way to send him safely off, to let him be where he needed to be.

A few years ago, working briefly at Capitol Hill PC, I recalled a story told by the chaplain of the US Senate, Richard Halverson. In this story which I read, every Monday the chaplain would write to 5 senators, saying:

"This week I will be praying for you. If there are special concerns or needs you have, please tell me so I can direct my prayers for you."

Then he would drop in to their offices that week to let them know. The only trouble was the senators were sure he wanted something in return. "What is it you really want? Gallery tickets? The senate dining room? Are you interested in a piece of legislation? What is it really?"

He would insist, NO I don't want anything, I just came to pray with you.

Eventually, he said, they began to believe him. But it was hard, because all of their other relationships had a little hook in them, do this favor, sign this bill and so forth. Have you ever experienced that in life?

Paul says that is not the ideal loving relationship. God calls us to a higher humanity - something different.

We can begin by being in Christ, seeing things from another set of eyes and making our love a stable platform.

Love with no strings attached. Without an agenda. The source for that, we know, is Jesus Christ.