

“How Does God’s Love Abide?”

1 John 3.16–24

The Rev. Hal Chorpensing, Plymouth Cong’l UCC, 7 May 2006

When I was reading this week’s lectionary texts, I was struck by a rhetorical question raised in the passage from the First Letter of John: “How does God’s love abide in anyone who has the world’s goods and sees a brother or sister in need and yet refuses help?” That’s kind of a weird question. How does God’s own love remain in someone who has ability and refuses to help someone else?

I decided I had to do a bit of sleuthing and decided to look at this sentence in the original Greek, and it got even stranger. One phrase “the world’s goods” in Greek is literally the world’s life... *bios* (from which we get the word biology)... which can mean life or the things that are necessary to sustain it: food, water, shelter. So, the question is what if someone who has food, water, and shelter refuses help to another?

And then there was a real discontinuity in the New Revised Standard Version translation, which is usually very accurate. The NRSV says, “and yet refuses help.” But the Greek says “but withholds gut-level compassion.” Do you hear the difference? The NRSV is foreshadowing the “truth and action” the writer speaks of in the next paragraph.

So, the original Greek speaks of gut-level compassion, which the New International Version translates as “pity” (which is one of the reasons I don’t recommend the NIV).

Then I looked at the Revised English Bible, which is more of a paraphrase than the NRSV, but it got closer to the meaning of the Greek: “But if someone who possesses the good things of this world sees a fellow-Christian in need and withholds compassion from him, how can it be said that the love of God dwells in him?”

Compassion. It’s a tough word in Greek, especially when it’s emphasized by the use of the word “gut.” When you and I talk of having a gut-feeling, we’re usually talking about intuition or knowing something on a deep, non-cognitive level. But to the ancient Greek-speaker, the gut was the center of all deep emotion, so it’s kind of like the way we might use the metaphors of heart or head.

So, how does God’s love dwell within us, who have life-sustaining goods, if we look upon others without being moved by compassion? It isn’t that God doesn’t love us. Rather, it’s that we don’t get the privilege of being people who reflect God’s love to others.



Clearly, this passage can inform the way we relate to others, both on a personal level and in the way we as a congregation and denomination relate to others through mission and outreach. If we are moved by compassion in our gut, the compassion that was central to Jesus’ message, then we will not simply feel, but act. This is the ethic of compassion, which is based on willingness to sacrifice something of oneself.

I got a clear example of this last weekend, when I heard Tom and Paula Dille do a presentation on the work they are doing in Angola with our Global Ministries. As you probably know, they and their family are building schools for young Angolan women, carrying on the work that Tom’s parents did as Congregational missionaries.

It was striking to me the way Tom warned us not to think of Angolans as less than we are in any way. Pity was nowhere to be found, but there was a mountain of compassion.

They see the problems, feel a sense of deep compassion, and then act.

Our junior high Sunday school class was considering this, as well. They were working with the costs of providing people in the developing world with some basic necessities. For example, \$12 given to UNICEF can buy a package of high-energy protein

biscuits, especially developed for malnourished children.¹ And it only takes \$40 to provide a wheelchair for someone who otherwise has to crawl to be ambulatory.

And then they asked the tough ethical question: How can we justify spending over a million dollars to renovate and expand a church building. *This is the kind of questions we all should be asking.* It isn't that we don't need new space; we do! But who said it was either/or? I know that there is yet another million dollars in the bank accounts of our members that could be devoted to providing relief for others. To pit growing the congregation against helping those in the developing world is a false dichotomy. We can do both, if we have the will.

You know the old saying, "Give someone a fish and they eat for a day, teach them to fish, and you've fed them for a lifetime." But that isn't quite valid if that person is prevented from fishing because someone else owns the lake and won't allow them to fish. That argues for changing the systems that keep people locking in poverty and oppression. Primarily, we need to be working not to act out of pity and provide charity, but to respond from a sense of compassion and provide tools to change the system. And there is no better tool than education. I make that claim because there are many people in this country willing to provide charity, but few who have the courage and will to change the system.

We also need to guard against being self-righteous in what we do. I don't know how many of you remember the film, *Babette's Feast*, but I watched it again the other day. It's a wonderful film with exquisite contrasts in the way people do good, and in many ways, it functions as a parable.

Babette is a French refugee who is taken in as a servant by two unmarried sisters in the cold, isolated northern part of Denmark in the late 19th century. Babette is a Roman Catholic, and the two sisters are part of a rigid, puritanical sect started by their late father. The two sisters have been carefully taught to deny themselves any kind of pleasure, other than helping others. The narrator in the film says, "They spent most of their time and their money helping others." The sisters, Martina (named after Martin Luther) and Philippa (named after Phillip Melancthon) are shown delivering soup to the elderly townspeople and doing the work of charity, which is important.

Her child and husband killed in a war, one of Babette's few connections to France is that a friend renews her lottery ticket each year. 15 years after her arrival with Martina and Philippa, Babette receives word that she has won the fantastic sum of 10,000 francs in the lottery.

The sisters are sure she will return to France with her newfound fortune. Babette insists on preparing a splendid meal for the 100th anniversary of the pastor/father's birth as a way to thank Martina and Philippa. The few remaining members of the sect are suspicious and tell each other simply to endure the meal, not to enjoy it or comment upon it. She order a huge array of delicacies from France, everything from live quail to fresh fruit to champagne. And then she prepares a feast beyond compare. And in every dish there is love.

As people consume the several varieties of wine, which some initially resisted, they soften to the idea that they might enjoy this meal together. They savor it, celebrate it, and connect with each other in new ways. The meal together heals old wounds. A couple who had been tormented by an affair reaches a place of acceptance and letting go. An old beau of Philippa's confesses that he has thought of her every day and will continue to do so, even as they are entering old age. A brother confesses that he has been cheating the other, and they reconcile and forgive. All of this is accomplished over a meal.

¹ source: UNICEF.org

And when Martina and Philippa ask Babette when she will return to France, she says she is not returning, as there is nobody to come home to. The sisters inquire about the 10,000 francs, and Babette reveals that it is gone...all spent on the feast she gave to thank the sisters for their kindness in taking her in.

The two sisters gave of themselves over a long span of time, and Babette gave of herself in one dramatic gesture. In some ways, Babette is like the woman who breaks open the jar of costly ointment and anoints Jesus. There are echoes of the story of the Emmaus story, when Jesus is made known to the two disciples who extend hospitality to him in the breaking of bread.

May the feast before us today, be as Babette's feast for us. May it strengthen our bonds as a congregation, reveal to us the presence of Christ, and show us God's extravagant welcome and abundance. And may it reinforce in us the idea that our lives need to be guided by love and by compassion.

Amen.