

“A Love That Grieves”
September 19, 2010

Jeremiah 8:18-9.1
Luke 16:10-15

Wouldn't you think that, a week after preaching on *sin*, of all things, a preacher in a progressive Christian church would be relieved that this is Phoenix Affirmation Sunday and the Affirmation of the month is all about *love*? Wouldn't you think that a preacher who started last Sunday's sermon with the Wheel of Unfortunate Theology would be grateful that this Sunday's sermon gets to incorporate Progressive Christianity's fortunate theology that emphasizes the centrality of God's everlasting *love*? Wouldn't you? I would.

And yet I confess that some hesitance and resistance are mingled in with my relief and gratitude. After all, doesn't it seem as if I'm up here talking about love almost all the time? Love, love, love. I wonder if *you* don't wonder if I'll ever stop talking about love and find something else to preach about. I wonder, too, about something we might call “love inflation” – if “love” gets repeated over and over and over and over, couldn't it start to lose its meaning? And I wonder about something else, what we might call “love saccharinization” – the danger of coming to understand and live love in a superficial way, the danger of coming to understand and live love as some anemic, sickly sweet sort of thing that makes no demands on us and leaves us feeling more than a bit self-satisfied.

Nonetheless, this is indeed a Phoenix Affirmation Sunday here at the First Congregational Church of Sonoma, UCC, and, on Phoenix Affirmation Sundays, we explore one of the twelve affirmations developed several years ago that describe what it means to be a progressive Christian. September is the ninth month of the year, and, lo and behold, we are on Affirmation Nine:

As Progressive Christians, we affirm that we are called to root our lives in the faith that “in Christ all things are made new and that we, and all people, are loved beyond our wildest imagination – for eternity.”

There's that love thing again – progressive Christians proclaim that all people are loved beyond our wildest imagination – for eternity. All people – not just Christians, not just people of some identifiable faith. All people – not just the generous, kind, and honest ones. All people – not just those who work for justice and peace. All people – not just the people who believe that God loves all people. “All people” means all people – the oppressed and the oppressor, the victim and the perpetrator, the poor and the rich, the fundamentalist and the progressive, and, let us remember as yet another ugly campaign season begins to heat up, it also means the Republican and the Democrat and the Libertarian and the Green Partier ... and the Tea Partier. “All people” means all people. ... And, oh yes, “eternity” means eternity.

On the surface, this affirmation seems easy to embrace here in this congregation. This church has long understood that the Christian path is not the one and only path to fullness of life, not the one and only expression of a “true” faith. Five years ago, as this congregation looked at itself and tried to discern what God was asking it to do, you said

that you were looking for a minister that would help you find “new ways to love our brothers and sisters in Sonoma and around the world,” new ways to mirror God’s love for all people and for all of creation.

But scratch beneath the surface, and perhaps this progressive Christian congregation may pause or even flinch at the idea of God loving some people. Does God really love would-be and actual Q’uran burners in Florida and elsewhere? Does God loves demagogues who use fear and ignorance to feed hate and division? Does God love those who reap obscene profits from exploiting the earth and exploiting other human beings? Do we really believe that God loves all people? Can we take a deep breath, remind ourselves that “all people” means all people, and then honestly, fully affirm that God loves everyone forever? And even if we can, do we want to? Are we willing to?

To answer any of those questions, we need to start with what we think love is -- how we experience it, understand it, and try to live it in human life – before we can even imagine what it might mean that *God* loves all people.

What do you mean when you say you love someone, whether it’s someone you know or someone across the globe whom you’ll never meet? What do you mean when you say you know someone else loves you? Is “love” a feeling, an action, a way of life, an attitude, a commitment? All of the above? Some? None? How do you experience and understand love? [Congregation answers.]

And what does human love look like when a beloved has become lost – in anger or addiction or self-loathing or self-importance? What does human love look like when a beloved has embraced a way of living that damages self and others over and over again? What does human love look like when a beloved has turned his or her back on kindness, generosity, and justice or when a beloved has rejected any and all kinds of love other than self-serving love? How does one express love when that happens? How does one act on love in those circumstances? And how does one keep on loving in those circumstances?

Those of us gathered here this morning might have a number of different answers, but we might find agreement on at least two or three things. We might agree that love in those tough circumstances, real love, doesn’t simply say, “I love you, so you’re ok and I’m ok, and I’m not going to say or do anything about whom and what you’re hurting.” We might agree that real love is something deeper and more demanding than that.

And I also think we might agree that love in those tough circumstances is itself tough, hard to keep alive and hard to keep healthy. And I think we might agree on one last thing, that sometimes it simply isn’t possible to keep on loving in all circumstances. Sometimes love ends; sometimes we hit the limits of our human capacity to love. We may grieve what the beloved has done and is doing, and we may grieve that our own ability to love cannot outlast the grief and the pain. But whether or not we grieve it, human love can come to an end.

So what might any of this tell us about what Phoenix Affirmation Nine means when it proclaims that God loves all people and that God loves us all for eternity? Whatever else it might mean, this affirmation means that God’s love is far greater than human love, which can fade and die or become distorted and disordered. The Phoenix Affirmations proclaim that the God Christians know in and through Jesus Christ loves with a love that never fades, never dies, and never excludes.

But if God – the mystery at the heart of the universe, the Spirit that moves through all creation – loves all people forever, no matter what, what about the people

throughout the world and throughout history whose lives are marked by hatred, greed, destruction, and violence? And what about us? What about the ways in which we have lived and we continue to live less as God's beloved servants and more as our own gods at the center of our own universes?

What can it mean to affirm that God loves all people when many of us in that "all people" category can get and have gotten mean, selfish, hurtful, and lost? Jeremiah gives us a glimpse this morning. The Biblical witness and, I suspect, the witness of our own lives and loves, is that holy love, everlasting love, God's love is a love that grieves.

Hear again the truth of God that comes through Jeremiah:

"My joy is gone, grief is upon me, my heart is sick. Why have they provoked me to anger with their images, their idols? I am hurt, I mourn, and dismay has taken hold of me. O that my head were a spring of water, and my eyes a fountain of tears, so that I might weep day and night!"

The Biblical witness, the Christian witness, the witness of deep human love – all testify to the presence of grief, powerful, painful grief within God's love for all people. Can we join these witnesses? Can we join with the group of folks who developed the Phoenix Affirmations and affirm that we believe God loves all people for eternity, when we understand that love as being a love that grieves? Can we affirm that, yes, God loves even the Q'uran burners, the exploiters, purveyors of hate and intolerance, that God loves us, even in our ugliest moments and our least loving moments?

And can we affirm an eternal love that grieves all of our failures to love well and fully, an eternal love that, in grief and hope, calls us to surrender and return home, return to love, no matter how far from home we've traveled? Can we affirm a love that will never give up on us, grieves every time we refuse the invitation to be gathered in, as the choir sang a few minutes ago, and that rejoices when any one of us finally accepts the invitation to know how deeply we are loved?

The invitation is constant and eternal. There is nothing we can do to change that. How we RSVP, though, is up to us.

May love -- eternal, grieving, rejoicing love -- be our guide, our guardian, and our light, this day and always.

Amen.

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