

“Defining Love”
a sermon by Kyndall Rae Rothaus,
concerning Matthew 22:34-40
for Lake Shore Baptist Church, Waco,
on October 29, 2017

When Jesus says the most important of all the laws is love, I suspect we all agree with him. I doubt anyone is thinking that Jesus rather missed the mark on this one. The notion that love is the highest of values and the true heart of the law is pretty much a universally popular idea. The problem, of course, is that while we all agree that love is essential, we do not all agree on what love is.

bell hooks points out that while love is a much written about topic, there are very few clear definitions from which to begin our conversations, confessions, and commitments regarding love. We can talk about love a lot and still end up with radically different—even contradictory—ways of showing it. Do all these varied expressions of care show love? Or do our efforts sometimes result in the antithesis of the very love we profess?¹

I’ve thought many times in my life about the letter I received from my father-in-law after the announcement of my impending divorce. This was a man who had been a father to me in so many ways, and so it was gut-wrenching to read his letter to me. The letter was his scathing attempt to shame me into staying married, regardless of what such a sacrifice would cost my soul, my physical safety, and my emotional wellbeing.

The thing that hurt me most was knowing that in his mind, he was loving me with that letter. I’m sure he thought of it as an act of love. I’m also certain there is nothing I could do or say to help him see that he was hurting, not helping. He couldn’t see that his absolute certainty that he knew what was best for me and the resulting attempt at coercion was not actually an act of love but an act of domination, designed to dictate my life on his terms. Terms which, conveniently, were also God’s terms as he saw it. The possibility that I had my own relationship to God, that I must remain obedient to my conscience, not his, that my conscience might know more about my life than his conscience were not realities he took seriously when he loved me. Thus his “love” morphed into a tool for forcing my submission to his rules rather than love being the permission and support to blossom according to my own. It pains me to think he surely believes it was his “tough love” that cost us our connection and not his lack of empathy—not his lack of listening or understanding, not his lack of respect for my suffering and my choices.

This misunderstanding of love’s true work isn’t just a flaw of my former father-in-law but a struggle for all of us, myself included. We often mistake our need to direct and control the lives of others as love. After all, we just want the best for them. After all, we know what is best. Don’t we?

When I talk about misunderstanding love as coercion, I am *not* talking about the boundaries we give our children to keep them safe or the boundaries we set for others to protect ourselves. Boundaries are not coercion. In regards to children, boundaries are often a safety necessity. In

adult relationships, boundaries are an act of self-love and self-definition, without which meaningful healthy relationships cannot exist.

The perversion of love I am talking about is that habit we all have from time to time of manipulating or pressuring others so they will act how we want and not how they best see fit in accordance to their own conscience. In the church, this dominating posture towards others often gets masked as pious zeal: *My conscience is better than your conscience, and it's my job and my "Christian" duty to tell you so.* But is asserting my superior morality over yours an act of love or an act of ego?

This sermon probably sounds more like an essay or a personal reflection than a sermon or a proper exegesis, but I can't help but think such exploration of the topic is *necessary*. If we are going to take Jesus seriously when he says love God and love your neighbor as yourself, we need to have some inkling about what on earth love really is.

I've often heard it said that love is an action, not a feeling, but I'd like to challenge that statement and suggest that feeling is, in fact, an important component of love. Obviously there are times we do things we don't feel like doing because of our love for others, like getting up in the middle of the night when your kid throws up in bed. No one ever feels like cleaning up vomit, but most of us do it anyway if a person we love is sick.

But those aren't the feelings I'm talking about. In their article, "A Pedagogy of Radical Love," the two educators Joy L. Kennedy and Thomas Grinter point us to the Good Samaritan—a story often used by Christians to illustrate how love is an action, not a feeling. But these two writers point out that viewpoint skips over the part of the story where it says the Good Samaritan was "moved with pity." Empathy, they argue, is key to love. To love you must be able to feel or to imagine how it feels to be in someone else's shoes.ⁱⁱ

When you clean up your kid's vomit, you feel disgusted by the smell and it's gross. But you also know what it's like to be sick and that the little guy can't help it. You know how it feels to want to be comforted when you don't feel well, and you know that if you were him, you'd want to be able to lie down on a clean bed with clean sheets while you try to get better.

And so your love is both action and feeling . . . and even if, on the surface, all you feel is the urge to plug your nose and leave the room, there is some deeper—maybe even momentarily unconscious—feeling that keeps you rooted in the moment, and that feeling is empathy. It is a feeling which, even when it is not loud or overwhelming, still influences your decisions and your actions. Empathy is probably why we don't generally kill one another and why we will sometimes help a complete stranger. If our understanding of love is about action only, Kennedy and Grinter argue that we may fail to be sympathetic or empathetic to the lived experiences of others.ⁱⁱⁱ For love to truly be a liberating force, it must be both feeling and action.

I remember walking along the Bricktown Canal in downtown Oklahoma City with my parents, and we found two baby ducks in the canal who had gotten separated from their mother. We were looking around for the mama and the rest of the brood when someone shouted to us from across the water. "She's down there," he pointed. The baby ducks began to swim in the right direction,

but they had a long way to go. We began to cheer them on. When they started to veer off and head the wrong way again, we hollered, “No, no, not that way! She’s this way!” as if the baby ducks could understand what we were saying.

We followed them for quite some time. We reached where our car was parked, but we kept on walking with the ducks. By this point, we were invested in seeing them return to their mother, and so was the small crowd of people walking down the sidewalk on the other side of the canal, cheering and shouting their guidance with as much dedication as we were. When the two little ducklings finally reached their family, we all erupted in applause, and other people came over to see what the excitement was all about. My parents and I looked across the canal at our fellow duckling fan club, none of whom we knew by name, and we all smiled and waved gleefully at each other, reveling in the unexpected kinship we had just shared on account of the ducks and then we all wandered off to go our separate ways.

Was that small adventure with the ducks an act of love? I don’t know, but it was an experience of shared empathy, and empathy is how love is born and grown. Love doesn’t always feel warm and fuzzy, but *love always feels*. It feels with those who are lost and hurting, feels with the ostracized, feels with those who are misunderstood.

Love is an action, but love is also a feeling. At the root of our action on behalf of others must be the feeling that we can, or some level, imagine what it is like to be in their shoes. So many attempts at love go awry when we forget to pay heed to another person’s experience. Systems of oppression thrive when love no longer requires us to get inside another person’s point of view, understand the world through their eyes, and *feel*. Systems of oppression want us to believe love can be distant and detached—that you can somehow “love the sinner” without the foggiest understanding of what a day in that person’s life is actually like. You can “love the sinner” without knowing her name or his story. You can “love the sinner” without any transformation or awareness of your own sins. You can sit back, make sophisticated judgments in God’s name, and not ask your enemy or the object of your scorn a single question about their own journey. “Love” becomes something we can launch from a distance in the form of money or policy or fiercely held opinion rather than the nitty-gritty engagement of working to see the world through someone else’s eyes.

When Jesus said, “Love your neighbor,” he didn’t shout these instructions down to us from the heavens. He said it from a human mouth and from a human body looking at the world with human eyes. If you want a good theology of love, take a long look at Jesus’ humanity.

Somewhere along the way I also picked up the idea that love is self-denial—that, like Jesus on the cross, I must give myself away, reject my own well-being and safety for the sake of others, sacrifice, sacrifice, sacrifice. This understanding of love fails to account for the fact that Jesus resurrected and by no means stayed dead. To love someone doesn’t mean allowing them to suck the life out of you. To love doesn’t mean to stay down.

Women in particular are often susceptible to this misunderstanding of love as unchecked denial of self. We’ve been trained to silence our own needs while we scurry around meeting everyone else’s. Most of the literature on love we have preserved through the centuries was written by

men, but if we want a definition of love that is full and complete, we need also to listen to women, especially as women speak out of their common experience of self-loss. The black feminist Audre Lorde makes important contributions to this conversation in her provocatively titled essay, “The Uses of the Erotic,” in which she reclaims *eros* as more than sexual *and* contrary to the pornographic. She defines “erotic” as the assertion of one’s life force.^{iv} Understood in this sense, love is never disempowering. Instead of giving yourself away, love empowers you to give of your power while the self remains intact. Rather than a self-negation, it’s a self-blossoming.

As for feeling and empathy, Audre Lorde explains that it is necessary not only to know what others are feeling, but also to know what *you* are feeling. If your feelings are suppressed, you will end up you end up using others or being used rather than making genuine connections.^v To connect and to love you must feel what you feel and feel what others feels.

When Jesus says to love your neighbor, he says to love your neighbor as yourself. Without love of self, you cannot have love of neighbor. You can have co-dependency, perhaps, or addiction or obligation or the need to be needed. But you cannot know the richness of love until you value your own self. Love rejects relentless self-sacrifice in favor of mutuality and spiritual growth for all.

Love does not enable someone else’s poor treatment of you. Love loves what is good and noble and true and strives for those things. Love fosters growth. Love propels. Love doesn’t hold people back—not you, not the people you care about. Love releases people when release is called for.

Jesus says these are the greatest commandments: Love God with all your heart and mind and soul and love your neighbor as yourself. To do this, we must develop a clearer sense of what love is. We must know what we mean when we talk about love, and we must know what we do not mean. It is not enough to say we believe in love or even that we act in love. We must know how to distinguish love from its counterfeits. We must know how to recognize that which perverts our own attempts at love and how to return to a love that is pure.

When Jesus said, “Love your neighbor,” it meant something, and while all who heard him applauded, only a few would take him seriously enough to spend a life discerning what love was and is and can be. Would that you and I be among the few. Amen.

ⁱ bell hooks, *all about love* (Harper Perennial 2000), pp. 3-14.

ⁱⁱ Joy L. Kennedy and Thomas Grinter, “A Pedagogy of Radical Love: Biblical, Theological, and Philosophical Foundations,” *International Journal of Critical Pedagogy*, Vol. 5, No. 1 2013, p. 47.

ⁱⁱⁱ Kennedy and Grinter, p. 48.

^{iv} Audre Lorde, “Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power,” *Sister Outsider* (Crossing Press CA 1984), 55.

^v Lorde, 59.