

Compelling Love: 1 Corinthians 9:16-23

This past week during our Encounter meeting, Jay offered a lesson on God's love based on *Love You Forever* by Robert Munsch. The group talked a little bit about the kind of love that parent's have for their kids, and how God's love compares. It was a great lesson, and reminder of God's great love for us. After our meeting, I arrived home just in time to tuck the kids in and read them a story. As I was getting Alice settled in, she pulled out a book that she had brought home from the school library. It was *Love You Forever*. Go figure! We have read the story together before, and just like every other time I read it, I couldn't make it to the end without some tears. "I'll love you forever, I'll like you for always, as long as I'm living, my baby you'll be."

For those of you who are familiar with the book, you will recall how the mother creeps across the floor, or peeks up into the bed, or drives across town and climbs in her grown son's window – all to rock her child and tell him how much she loves him. I got to thinking about how God's love for us is like that mother's love: a God who not only creeps across the floor or drives across town to show his love, but who crosses the expanse of the universe to embrace his people; a God for whom the phrase, "as long as I'm living my baby you'll be" is an eternity of love because God lives forever; a God who loves us in the midst of our goodness, and in the darkness of our sin.

God, in Christ, has shown us his great love: steadfast love that pursues us through darkness, reconciling love in his Son Jesus who lived and died for us, a love that heals all wounds, binds together everything that is broken, restores and recreates all things, a love that is higher, wider and deeper than we could ever imagine, and a love that cannot be destroyed by anything in all creation, including death. It is a love that unites us to God in Christ and calls us beloved, and invites us to share in the relationship of self-giving love that the Father shares with the Son, bound together by the Holy Spirit. "I'll love you forever, I'll like you for always, *because* I am living, my child you'll be."

This is the Good News of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. And it is the good news that all Christians who have been gripped by this love are compelled to proclaim. In his letter to the churches in Corinth, Paul expresses his compulsion to preach *this* gospel to everyone. For Paul, the gospel is the one thing that is for *all* people. Paul feels so strongly about this gospel and is so driven to proclaim it that he will go to whomever needs to hear it, wherever they are. Church people and not church people. Rich people, poor people, happy people, angry people. The power of the gospel has possessed him to such an extent that he feels he has only two options in response to it: preach it or die. Can you imagine being so compelled, feeling such urgency for something that you would rather die than express it? Perhaps the only thing that would come close to that kind of urgency is expressing the love between parent and child. I don't think it's any mistake that the model we have to express God's love for us is the love of a parent for a child – the love between the Father and the Son.

This passage has often been used to support various evangelism or marketing strategies for dumbing down the Good News in order to make it relevant and acceptable to the

culture we live in, with the manipulative intention of getting more people in pews. This understanding of “becoming all things to all people” in order to be relevant to everyone is the driving force behind much of the seeker sensitive movement and its various spin-offs. In many cases the church has looked at the culture, and become the culture in order to speak into it. We have used this passage to justify the way we do church, particularly contemporary church, so that we can attract unbelievers. Unfortunately, in its effort to become more culturally attractive, the church has often watered down the claims of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, and become so much like the world around it that it has nothing distinctive to say about God’s reconciling love in Jesus Christ.

I don’t think this is what Paul had in mind. Ultimately, this approach misses Paul’s point on a number of levels. Paul’s motivation behind becoming all things to all people was the transforming effect the power of the Gospel had in his own life, and his desire that others would experience it as well. This is what drove his sense of urgency to proclaim the love and salvation of God to all people. The way Paul did that was by going out into the world to where the people were at.

When I was at Regent College in the mid 1990s, a group of students and faculty dedicated themselves to demonstrating the love of God for all people, and to preaching the Good News to those who weren’t a part of a faith community. Their love for people didn’t inspire them to dream up contemporary forms of worship that non-churched people would find attractive. They didn’t create an evangelism strategy for the church to implement. They didn’t invent more programs for people to come to. What they did was move into the downtown Eastside of Vancouver and *became* downtown Eastsiders. The downtown Eastside of Vancouver has one of the highest poverty rates in Canada, is an area infused with drug and alcohol abuse, prostitution, crime, gang activity and homelessness. These people *need* to hear about the love of God for them and how God has bought back their lives in Christ and wants them to live full and rich lives in loving communion with him. This group of educated, professional, middle class folks, who had earned the right to a certain kind of life gave it all up in order that some might be saved. Like Paul, they too felt the urgency of the call of the gospel for all people and were prepared to sacrifice their “better knowledge” or their social status in order to walk alongside people in their weakness.

What their actions resulted in was the creation of a Christian community, located in the midst of a broken world, that was dedicated to living together in unity of purpose and mind, out of a common love for God and his people. And as they began to build relationships with their neighbours they developed friendships, began to understand their stories, and began to see the world through their eyes. And in this way, they gained a sense of how the stories of their neighbours might connect to the larger gospel story.

I think the point that we often miss when we look at Paul’s words as an evangelization or marketing strategy for the church is that in order to love our neighbours, we need to be connected enough to them to have genuine care and concern for them. In order to love our neighbours and to share the transforming love of God with them, we need to be in relationship with the folks who need to hear about the saving work of God in Christ. You

can't guide others in their journey if you don't know where they are starting from. Even though Paul founded and built several churches throughout the region, he did not promote a self-centered, self-protective form of being church that was more concerned with its own strength and survival than it was about its call to go and make disciples of all nations. Instead, he urged believers to take their calling to preach the gospel seriously. If Jesus really does meet people where they are at, then perhaps we need to be where they are at too so that Jesus can use us to encounter and heal the lost and broken.

Now, it is true that we can't be all things to all people. And those who try usually end up sacrificing their integrity or the integrity of their message. But if we have been gripped by the power of God's love and his saving work, we will consequently be compelled to share this Good News with the rest of the world in any way we can in order to reach everyone we can: our neighbours, friends, family, and folks we don't yet know.

This is a difficult message for most mainline Protestants. The tradition of private faith has been long in the making, and it isn't easily undone. Individualism conditions us to believe that what I believe is my business and people are free to think whatever they want and that's their business. Sometimes our experience of sharing our lives with others leads us to feeling judged by them. Sometimes others feel judged by us. We don't want other people to think we are weird, or some kind of religious fanatic. Sometimes we are quite certain of exactly what we believe but are reluctant to share our uncertainty with others.

It's also a difficult message for those of us who like our lives just the way they are. We have worked hard to get where we are, and moving out of our comfort zones isn't exactly at the top of our priorities.

But here is the flip side. Let's ask ourselves, "do we think so little of God's saving work that we allow discomfort or fear to create a barrier to sharing it with our friends and neighbours?"

We can't be all things to all people, but we can be preachers of the gospel to some people. We all want children to know they are loved. We can be distinctively Christian grandparents or parents, sharing the Good News of God's love with our grandchildren and children. We can be distinctively Christian neighbours who come alongside our neighbours in the midst of their lives, develop relationships with them, learn their stories, and help them to see where their stories are met by God's big salvation story. We can demonstrate that we have been confronted by the gospel by the urgency we feel to share that good news with all people through getting involved in mission work. Financially supporting mission work is a good and necessary thing. But what about developing relationships with the people your money serves? Does the desire to share God's work with others who haven't yet heard about it compel you to go out into the world, develop loving relationships with others, get involved in their lives, and by the Holy Spirit, help them to experience the presence of God in a transforming way?

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After you have had your lunch and your afternoon nap, pull out a copy of Love you Forever and think about the way that God has demonstrated his love to us, by sending his Son to reconcile us to the Father, saving us from an eternity of sin, futility, and death. Think about how God has demonstrated his love to you personally, in the story of your own life. Think about how that story might resonate with your neighbour or your friend, co-worker, or family. Think about that. Isn't that a story that's worth sharing?