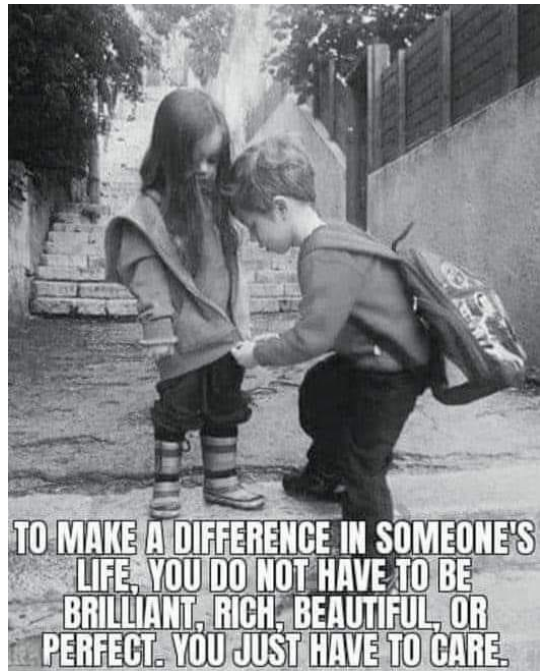


WHAT LOVE MAKES A DIFFERENCE?

I was shocked, surprised and humbled. Last Sunday right after worship, I was told by one of our congregants that in all his years in church he had never experienced a minister who preached love instead of fear. You know, fear of the Lord or some sort of admonishment that hell and damnation awaited people who didn't follow the "right" path. I was humbled because I know the failures I have perpetuated. I know the hubris and pride that too often motivates me. I know the less than loving thoughts that sometimes sit too deeply within my heart. I know that there are too many times I put my "minister" mask, girding myself for the day, and venture into the maelstrom of my calling while on guard.

I was shocked because too often I don't perceive myself as all that loving. I perceive so many others in our community of faith as far more loving than I am. I consider them saints on which I lean to strengthen my own resolve to more closely follow the Way of Jesus. I know that I would be less likely to persevere without them in my life. That's when I was overtaken by surprise.



I was surprised because it came to me in that moment – despite all my preaching about love and how God calls us to love one another as we are loved by God – that it is “where two or three are gathered that God is there.”¹ Indeed, it is our community of faith that provides the incubator within which love is nurtured and from where love is sent into the world to make a positive difference.



What most of us hear, read or watch about Christians, however, is that people are rejected for who they proclaim themselves to be. They are rejected because their political perspective is wrong. They are rejected because who they love is wrong. They are rejected because how they identify is wrong. They are rejected because they ask too many of the wrong questions – uncomfortable questions. They read the wrong books. They watch and enjoy the wrong movies, the wrong TV programmes and the wrong streaming services. They are rejected because of how they

¹ Matthew 18:20.

dress, or their tattoos, or their past mistakes, or their mental illness, or their neurodivergency, or their addictions, or their physical challenges, or their poverty, or their race, or....

It's too hard to love such people and much easier to reject them out of hate, trying to keep a community of faith "pure."

There is a casual group of people with whom I meet with every couple months or so. We have gathered for almost 50 years. The group composition has changed over time, but the oldest of us were once part of the Charismatic Movement in the early 1970s. You know, speaking in tongues, speaking prophecy, baptism of the Spirit – all of us intimately connected to

mainline church denominations and faithful attendees, but who enjoyed the freedom to explore our faith in ways that made our parents rather uncomfortable. I stayed with the Charismatic Movement for a little over two years, but I left as I found the words and actions of the movement didn't seem to match



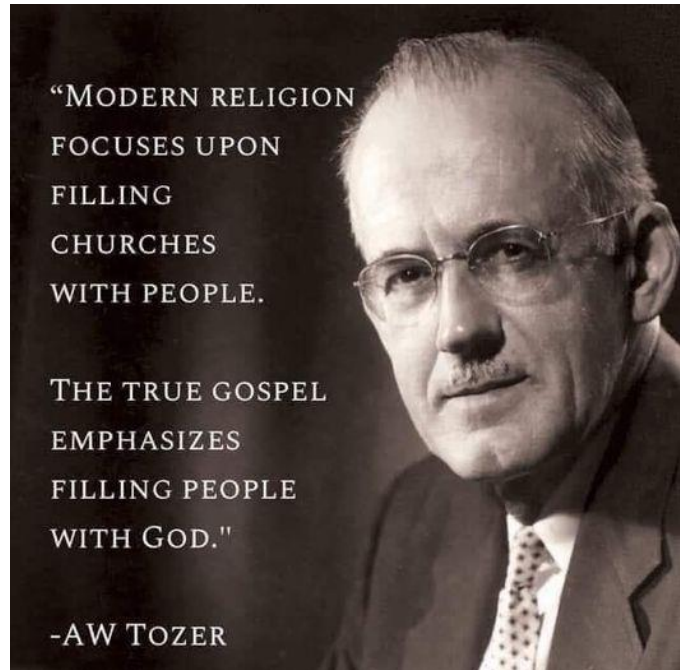
what I considered to be the Way of Jesus. In fact, while I could speak in tongues and enjoyed the almost jazz feel of singing in tongues, I found there was an intellectual shallowness when I was longing for depth. In discussion groups my questions were turned aside without any answer, just a, "Wait until you spend more time in the Spirit and you'll understand" kind of brush-off. This 50-year-old group was started by a bunch of us who found ourselves disillusioned about the movement, but still hopeful that there was something more.



One of the group is a successful musician who came out as gay and lost everything – only to find true and lasting love outside of the boundaries of the movement. Others were women who weren't allowed to preach and could only find their voices in – ironically – mainline, progressive churches like ours. Still others decried the harmful theology which led to domestic violence – either that of male perpetrators who repented or that received by women abused. Even though we all bore scars from our experiences in

the movement, we still sensed the God of all Creation was offering us the pearl of great price. No matter what we felt we had lost, we longed for the love that could be found within a community of faith that didn't hate but embraced each of us for whom we were and for whom we continued to become.

Let me state clearly that such love is tough, tiring and taxing! We have learned to challenge one another when we perceive anyone is travelling the wrong path – not to bring them into line with our “correct” example – but to have an open conversation so that, together, we can determine which path is rooted in love. We have learned to listen carefully to the perspectives of others because we trust them from long experience. We have welcomed other “refugees” from harmful Christian communities – people from all backgrounds, circumstances and challenges. We are constantly stretched to weave this community as a healthy space of mutual love and self-giving that celebrates diversity.



“MODERN RELIGION
FOCUSES UPON
FILLING
CHURCHES
WITH PEOPLE.

THE TRUE GOSPEL
EMPHASIZES
FILLING PEOPLE
WITH GOD.”

-AW TOZER

But, oh! it is so wonderfully powerful a community within which to share.

Let me share a story from the book “Strength for the Journey” by Diana Butler Bass.² It is about Trinity Episcopal Church in Santa Barbara, California after that church had wrestled with the threat of a devastating earthquake and decided to do something daring about it. Diana writes:



“One Sunday in March 1996, Bishop Fred Borsch of Los Angeles rededicated Trinity Church. As the service began, he banged his pastoral staff on the church doors and commended, “LET THE DOOR BE OPENED!” The massive oak doors swung wide. A few weeks previously, and after a year of exile, the congregation had moved back into the sanctuary. We gladly opened those doors...

“In eighteen short months, the congregation raised the money to retrofit the sanctuary for earthquake safety. But it

² From pages 177-178.

was not about the money. People were coming. New people. Lots of them. Including me. The church's membership doubled in those few months. And it would double again in the next couple years. No program or evangelistic strategy prompted this growth. Rather, Trinity did something few churches think of doing — it just opened its doors. It opened spiritual and theological doors, doors of gender and class, actual doors and symbolic ones. And people walked in. Sometimes right in the middle of a service. And they stayed. Straight and gay, rich and poor, able-bodied and ill, healthy and wounded, the respectable and the outcast....Doubters, skeptics, and questioners. People bruised and battered by more narrow forms of religion.



“On that day, the once empty sanctuary was packed with hundreds of people celebrating the dedication of a church recently threatened with the wrecking ball... “LET

THE DOOR BE OPENED!” shouted Bishop Borsch. The command struck me as ironic. No one needed to tell us to open the door. We wanted it open. Opening doors was our mission. We practically threw them off the hinges.

“We had found something all too rare even in church: the freedom to be exactly who God made us to be. A community to which we could bring everything. A church with an open door.”

What is love? Love is throwing open doors and welcoming people in as we celebrate each one in community.