

Love and Hate

Texts: **Psalm 22: 25-31**; **1 John 4: 7-21**; Wayne Northey, *God is Love*

It was the age of big hair, leg warmers over jeans, moonwalking, and wearing your collar up. It was a time of Gucci suits, Rayban sunglasses, and Michael Milken riding high as the king of leveraged buyouts. It was the age of Valley Girl talk. “Like, I’m so sure, you totally can’t deny you know what I’m talking about, that would be way uncool. Instead, let’s get really stoked and listen to a rad sermon! Awe-some! I know, right now you’re like, dude, take a chill pill, you’re buggin’! As if! What – ever! Okay, I’m outties.”

It was the dawn of video games, when Pong at home on your tv was super hi-tech, invite-everybody-over-and-try-to-hit-the-square-ball-with-the-*small*-paddles, cool.

It was the early ‘80’s, the era of Reagan and the arms build-up, of Star Wars and the height of the Cold War, and tensions with the Soviets were high, before perestroika and glasnost and Gorbachev. Sting wrote his song *Russians* in which he memorably hoped that the Russians loved their children, too.

But at my house, there was no Cold War. There was a hot war going on, all the time, between me and my brother Dave. We regularly wailed on each other, and were ready to go nuclear at any time. We would routinely throw Rubik’s Cubes at each other’s heads. In a kind of proxy war, once one of his friends kicked me in the face with his army boots – I still have the cracked front tooth to show for that. I was ready to take the bandana tied around his parachute pant leg and tie it around his neck if he looked at me funny, which he always did. During one fight, one of us pushed the other one through the drywall at the foot of the stairs, which my father found oddly displeasing.

It would not be too much to say that we hated each other. Not just “I don’t like that guy” hate, but raw, visceral, “I can’t punch him hard enough” hate. Mutually assured destruction hate. I remember one day at the cottage, I was so frustrated after one fight that I went out and actually bloodied my hand punching an old rotting stump and thinking it was his face. How did I end up with a brother who was such a jerk? How did he? But I also remember how the next morning I was reading my Bible and I happened to read the text we heard from 1 John today: “If anyone says, ‘I love God,’

yet hates his brother, he is a liar. For anyone who does not love his brother whom he has seen, cannot love God, whom he has not seen.”

That brought me up short in my tracks. I got up and took a walk out to that stump. I looked at it. It looked back at me. We had nothing left to say to each other. Echoing in my head, over and over again was “anyone who does not love his brother whom he has seen, cannot love God, whom he has not seen.” I didn’t know what to do. But the Scripture wouldn’t let me go. I resolved not to hate him anymore. I resolved to stop the fighting. And from that day to this day, Dave and I have not had a physical fight again. Not one.

Now, I’m not saying that we became best friends. As if! We are still very different people. I won’t blow sugar up your nose and say that one day changed everything. Physically it did, but we were already a long way down that road and it was a long way back. And we’re not all the way there yet. We still tease each other with an edge. And a few years ago, after Kate told me that she thought everyone else in the room was nervous when Dave and I were together, I made a further resolution at New Year’s to make that no longer the case, and told my brother in an email that I was going to do my best to put all the edge out of my words and tone.

So the Scripture’s not done with me yet; it’s still working on me to finish the task it began 40 years ago. But it’s working. In spite of our history, I can now say with all honesty that I do love my brother, that I wish him nothing but the best in life, that I am proud of what he has accomplished, and that I wish we were closer together geographically, so that we would have more opportunities to build a stronger relationship with each other. I can honestly say now that I’m glad I didn’t actually kill him back then, prison sentence issue aside, and there are times when I actually really like him, like when we are talking basketball, about which he knows a lot more than I do.

But the point is, the claim to love God has consequences. The scriptures are powerful, and sometimes a verse won’t let you go. It won’t leave you alone. It will force you to make changes and make you do things you don’t want to do, things you can’t imagine doing. But it’s the only way forward. Love for others, even our brothers and our enemies, comes along with faith in Jesus Christ. It comes along with salvation. For who can hope to be saved without loving God in return for the love that God has shown us in Jesus Christ? Who can hope to be saved without letting the Word of God enter into his or her life to bring about changes, forcing us to let go of a cherished resentment or a habitual anger, or some other dearly held sin?

What happened to me is what should be happening to all of us, maybe not with that verse, but with some verse, some verse that gets under your skin and won't let you go. Your issue might be completely different from mine. Perhaps it is about money, and Jesus' word, "If you want to be perfect, sell all you have and give to the poor" is his word to you, as it was to the rich young man who became St. Francis – though I don't recommend stripping down to your underwear and leaving your clothes here in the church, as Francis did in his church long ago.

Maybe your issue is about lust, and the Scripture that touches you will be Romans 13:13, "Let us behave decently, as in the daytime, not in orgies and drunkenness, not in sexual immorality and debauchery, not in dissension and jealousy. Rather clothe yourselves with the Lord Jesus Christ." That verse touched St. Augustine once, so long ago, a man who had once prayed, "Lord, give me chastity ... but not yet." This is why we read the Scriptures: to allow that verse a chance to find us and to change us. It's the way God speaks to us and won't let us go. It's the power of God.

Just be careful not to take everything literally, and to consult with someone before taking any rash actions in response to the Scriptures. Origen of Alexandria, the greatest theologian of the church in the first three centuries, read Matthew 19:12: "There are eunuchs who have been so from birth, and there are eunuchs who have been made eunuchs by others, and there are eunuchs who have made themselves eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom of heaven" and went out and castrated himself. While St. Augustine inspired an order of monks, the Augustinians, and Francis inspired an order of monks, the Franciscans, Origen didn't find anyone who wanted to found an order of monks following in his, um, footsteps. Weird that, right, but oh well....

So the Scriptures are powerful, powerful, and can change your life. As Origen showed, they can sometimes be difficult to interpret, but St. Augustine comes to the rescue for us here: Augustine said that any interpretation that made you love God or your neighbor more was a good one, and any interpretation that made you love God or your neighbor less was a bad one. No using the Scriptures to inspire hate, but only to inspire love. How the world would be a better place if we all did that!

Love is the key to understanding the Scriptures, and the key to loving the invisible God. Although God is invisible, God's love is not. It is made manifest, as John says, or, as we might say, obvious to everyone in the cross of Jesus Christ. "This is how God showed God's love among us," John says: "God sent God's one and only Son into the world that we might live through him. This is love; not that we loved God, but that God loved us and sent God's Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins."

For all that I found my brother unlovable, the truth is that, in my hate, I was unlovable to God, and yet God loved me anyway and chose to redeem me in Christ. And in that redemption God insisted that I find love in my hate, and be something more than I was. That's the starting point of everything. Long before we ever move towards God, God has moved towards us. Long before we were made God's children, we were God's enemies, and while we were still God's enemies, God sacrificed God's Son for us. Yes, God asks us to change, to grow, to become more like Jesus, to be made more like the citizens of heaven that we soon shall be.

God asked me to find a way to love my brother, whom I can see, on my way to fully loving God, whom I can't see. But God doesn't ask us to do it first, to show our love for God. God asks us to do it second, in response to God's love for us, already made unmistakable in Jesus Christ.

Here to my left sits the sign of that love, the bread and the wine which are the body and blood of Jesus Christ, the Son of God, given for me, for you, for us all, given when we were unlovely, given when we were undeserving, given before we were anything at all. Come to the table where the invisible God makes God's love visible to us once more. Come and be changed. Come and be challenged. Come and experience the love of God for you, in Jesus Christ.

And may the love of God rule in our hearts and change us through God's Word to us, now and forever.

Amen