

De-centering Love

Sermon preached at Belmont United Methodist Church,

World Communion Sunday, 2 October 2022

1 John 4.7-21

Luke 10.25-27

I have chosen for us to reflect on this morning, these familiar verses from the first letter of John as we think together about global communion – or what those involved in GBHEM's global work who are visiting here this morning might call, pan-connexionalism, or what John Wesley called, his parish.

And if I have a text for this sermon, then it is this, 'those who love God must love their brothers and sisters* also.'

But, to paraphrase Jesus' most famous questioner, 'Who is my brother or my sister?'

And to quote a pop song of my youth, "What is love, anyway?"

There once was a rabbi who was asked by his students, "Master, how should one determine the hour in which night ends and day begins?" One student suggested, "Is it when a person can distinguish a sheep from a dog in the distance?" "No," said the rabbi, "It is not." A second student ventured, "Is it when one can distinguish a date tree and a fig tree from afar?" "It is not that either," replied the teacher. "Please tell us the answer," the students begged, "How should one determine when night has ended and day begun?" "It is when you look into the face of a stranger and see your sister or brother," said the rabbi. "Until then, night is still with us."

I come from Cambridge in the United Kingdom – a small island off the coast of continental Europe – which, despite being recently in the gaze of the whole world as we buried Queen Elizabeth II, is becoming an increasingly insular and insecure nation. Unsure of our place in the world since the break up of the largest empire to span the globe, our politicians vie to make Britain great again – to make Britain the centre of something – to make Britishness the essence of something – and in doing so we see the circle of who counts as my brother or my sister, my sibling, ever diminishing.

Frighteningly it is a phenomenon we see in other places too around the world – the election of politicians who claim to speak for the people while creating enemies of the people that a majority can unite against – often an indigenous or ethnic or other minority whom we can dehumanise in our need for control.

So Britain is in retreat from its European neighbours, from its glorious diversity, and from its global responsibilities because if we can't control the game, we would rather play on our own. Because that way, we can continue to pretend that we are in charge, that there is only one point of view and that we are not interdependent with the whole inhabited earth. That way we can keep the fear at bay even if inadvertently we are keeping ourselves in the dark.

I wonder what time of day or night it is where you come from?

This summer I was invited by the Methodist Conference in Britain to be one of three people giving a bible study on the text we have read this morning. The three of us – Mark, Raj and myself, were asked to prepare thoughts and questions to share through three different lenses: the lens of evangelism, the lens of inclusion, and the lens of justice. I was asked to focus the attention of the conference through the lens of inclusion and my first thought as I read this passage concerned, 'Who is including whom and in what?'

At first glance this text is about love. All three of us observed that there are 15 references verses to love as a noun or a verb in this short passage. But whose love? The passage is addressed to the Christian community – *we* are the beloved; *we* love; *we* ought to love; love is perfected in *us* – but whose love is it? Of course, it is God's love: even when it is at work in us, it is not our love that we are sharing. Rather, our acts of love are a participation in God's love as we allow that love to shape us and flow through us, which, frankly is a relief!

I remember my grandmother's funeral. We had chosen to sing *Love Divine All Loves Excelling* and as the minister who was leading the service introduced the hymn she announced, "And now we are going to sing Love Divine, because the love that Dorothy had for her family was a divine love.". And I thought... (much as I loved my grandmother) – if her love is what God's love is like, then we are all in trouble! My grandmother loved fiercely. But she had strong views about who should be included and who should be excluded within her circle of love; and from where I stood it had little to do with trying to see things the way God sees them.

But if divine love is what is at the centre – all other loves excelling – a love which is deeper than, more reliable than, and the basis of all the loves we otherwise know - if this what is at the centre – then where are we? Who is including whom as a brother or sister?

Last Sunday, I was visiting my father in my home town of Dover where in case you are wondering there *are* white cliffs, but there are sadly no bluebirds... we decided to go to the Medieval Castle built on the cliff tops and amongst the treasures that have appeared there since I last visited as a child was a copy of the Mappa Mundi, designed by a monk of Canterbury in 1170.

This map is centred, not on the UK with the fingers of its pink empire stretching over three quarters of the globe, nor on the northern hemisphere with the southern continents diminished in size because of the curve of the earth; rather it is centred on Jerusalem, the holy of holies where the God of second temple Judaism was worshipped, and which Christians revere as the place of resurrection, and of the birth of the new community, into which by the work of the Holy Spirit we may also be born.

This map is a disc of the world, Jerusalem at the centre with the known continents of Europe, Asia and Africa surrounding it. The Americas, (I'm sorry) and Australasia, not then known to Europeans, are nowhere to be seen. Dover, however, my home town, is on the map, doubtless a sign of the regional bias of a monk of Canterbury just some 15 miles up the road, but even so, Britain, like most of the known nations of the earth on this map is portrayed at the edge: not central in the medieval mind map but still part of something... with a part to play in the family system of brothers and sisters in Christ.

As I thought about this text, and our theme and I thought about God's love being at the centre I was reminded of Abba Dorotheos' vision from the 6th century.

Imagine a medieval rose window – its frame like a wheel with spokes and at the centre Christ in glory. There is one in Christchurch cathedral in Oxford, which our common ancestors, John and Charles Wesley knew well. Imagine the world as a circle, with God at the center, and that the radii are the continents from which we all come. When those who wish to come closer to God walk towards the center of the circle, they come inevitably closer to each another. The closer they come to God, the closer they come to one another. And the closer they come to one another, the closer they come to God.

But this is no 21st model of globalization in which market forces bring us together in an uneven and unjust set of power relations that elevate the few at the expense of the many and which themselves are built on the unjust and diabolic power relations of slavery and colonisation of the centuries before. In Abba Dorotheos' vision it is not the market at the centre; or those with capital resources; or those with historic influence. In Abba Dorotheos' vision it is not *any* human being or institution at the centre, that can determine the way the world works; that can determine who will be treated as a person and who as a commodity; rather, what it is at the centre determining the basis of our relationships is the God who is love, who invites us, along with all creation to journey into that centre... and to discover more deeply what it means to live as brothers and sisters in our shared and divided world.

So the uncomfortable truth is that no human being is the host; we are all the guests; we are all those who are invited to come closer to God. And accepting that this means coming closer to others whom God has invited, even if we wouldn't. And because we are Christian this means both coming closer to those with whom we share a particular patch of earth – our neighbours – of whatever colour and creed, status or lifestyle, and coming closer to those with whom we live in communion with the risen Christ across the whole inhabited earth.

So here we are, from all over the world this morning, drawn to worship the God of love, and so drawn into one another's presence. And what a beautiful vision.

¹¹Beloved, since God loved us so much, we also ought to love one another. ¹²No one has ever seen God; if we love one another, God lives in us, and his love is perfected in us.

What a beautiful vision. How beautiful it is when brothers and sisters live together in unity. But, oh, the business of love being perfected in us... that is something else. And what

stories we could tell one another about that this morning if we had a safe enough and a brave enough space in which to do so...

One of the passions of my life is to paint. Often I can see the vision in my mind's eye, but the business of getting that picture onto the page or the canvas can be painstaking and painful. I paint with acrylics on board and I have learned that while there some subjects I can paint directly onto the final surface with a high chance of success, some have to be drawn and scaled and redrawn and rescaled and perfected before even starting to put the first stroke of paint onto the final surface.

At the moment I am trying to recreate an early morning vision of a black swan flying up the river Thames. In my mind I see it flying underneath an intricate blue cast iron bridge. The swan with its glorious white wing weathers and bright red beak, reflected in the water, was no problem, but the bridge... it is so complex, there are so many parts that need to connect and be in the right perspective, it is taking so much work to get to a place where it looks as if it would even stand up, let alone reflect the beautiful vision I have in my mind. At one level its a technical process that I need to master, but at another level it feels more like a process I submit myself too, my own understanding and assumptions about how it fits together being challenged and reformed again and again until the vision begins to emerge, realised in and through me.

Perhaps I should paint something simpler... but the vision will not be realised through taking the easy route... and God in God's wisdom, in choosing to collaborate with humankind has not taken the easy route, either envisioning an intricate and beautiful web of global interconnection and complexity that can only be perfected as all the parts allow themselves to be shaped and reshaped, positioned and repositioned – not by any colonial power – but by allowing love divine, all other loves excelling, to be perfected in us and amongst us.

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But this love, however mystical, is no gilded, spiritualised thing that bears no relation to the real life socio-political history and geography of the world. It is not a vision of another world, meant for the other side of the dirt; it is a full bodied, flesh and blood vision of the social, economic and political relations between us that are the means of perfecting us in love as we travel towards the heavenly city, not each alone, together.

And, surprisingly, perhaps, given the beauty of the famous passages of this letter of 1 John, this vision is wrought out of a schism in the church which was so bad that those who remained were advised not even to pray for those who have left and were still trying to disrupt the life of the beloved community that is addressed.

Here is no sentimental vision of inclusion on the basis of cheap grace and ignoring our differences; rather there is a hard edged exclusion at work of all that would undermine the possibility of the vision being realised...

But what on earth was it that drove this community to call those it felt the need to exclude, antichrists? What on earth was at stake?

There are some clues in the passage we have read, and more clues if you read the full letter, which I encourage you to do at home. It opens: *It was there from the beginning, we have heard it; we have seen it with our own eyes; we looked upon it and felt it with our own hands. (1.2) The word of life this is our theme.*

And from chapter 4: *The way to recognise the Spirit of God is this: every spirit which acknowledges that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God (4.2)*

What was at stake was whether not Jesus became truly human. Whether or not Jesus really took on the humanness of humanity. And this matters because it is deeply connected to our understanding of what salvation means.

If God has not become what we are in Christ, then how can we become what God is – whether in this life or the life to come? And if God only seemed to be human in Christ, God has not given God's real self to humankind, and salvation has nothing to do with being human beings fully alive or with the thriving of the intricate ecosystems that support all life.

And if God in Christ did not really live and love as an embodied person in the flesh, what does this God really care about how human beings deal with the flesh and blood matters of this world – with skin colour and culture; gender and sexuality; ability and disability; access to resources or dehumanising poverty; relationships between human and human; human and environment; and even between Christian and Christian.?

And for the early church this was an inclusion/exclusion matter – clarified at the Council of Nicea - not just on the grounds of right belief – of orthodoxy – because we only want to deal with people who think what we think, but because of the connection between what we think and how we behave... for if God is love; and love becomes truly human; love is not an abstract; a spiritualised matter; it is the action of embodied persons in relation to other embodied persons. Who we are in the body and how we are in our bodies together, matters.

So being the beloved community – being the beloved global community – being a global communion - becomes a matter of creating safe and brave spaces in which the non-coercive love of God can be experienced and in which we can take the steps that expose us to the power of love working as we connect and reconnect; share perspectives and learn to shift our ground in order to see from another point of view; and realise that to be truly part of the whole we need to reposition not only our understanding of each other's views, but our understanding of each other's embodiments, histories and cultures, and of our part in both the harming of one another and in one another's healing.

On the wall of the gatehouse in Wesley House in Cambridge, where I live and work, we have engraved one of Mr Wesley's most famous sayings, "I look upon all the world as my parish." But – even with the majority of our students coming from the majority world - it is a continuing journey to live into being an educational community that is engaged in a

genuine mutual learning and not inadvertently imposing a well meaning colonial framework on all the spaces in which we encounter each other.

It is Easter Day 2022. Six months ago. I am the guest of the Methodist Church in Kenya with whom Wesley House has an educational partnership. Planted by the British in 1862 it has been an independent church since 1967. As I prepare to preach – almost the only white person in a congregation of more than 500, I am acutely aware of the cultural violence perpetrated by my Methodist ancestors in Kenya – the demonization of everything African; the separating of young men and women from the culture around them by refusing to allow them to

complete the rites of initiation necessary to adult status in their community; the cutting off from sources of wisdom and identity of generations of people from traditions now half lost; the carving up of denominational missions on tribal lines that still reinforce and struggle to challenge electoral violence – and much more. I have made it my business to read this history and hear these voices and learn from them.

And yet important though these voices are for me to hear, there are other narratives that also need a place... the voice of one Kenyan research student, for example; as we stood outside the old divinity school in Cambridge where I was taught, I was explaining about the expiring of the 500 year lease on the building from St Johns College which expired in 1999, to which she said, 'You have been teaching theology in this university for more than 500 years? What took you so long to get to Kenya?'

As I prepared to preach the Easter message 6 months ago, I knew that whilst cultural humility was essential, this would not be the place to air a colonial guilt that would silence me and prevent any kind of encounter, because by being invited to preach and into the homes of my Kenyan hosts and into the classroom to teach at the university, I was being invited to enter the borderland of encounter in which we might form and reform one another.

But in the classrooms of Kenya Methodist University I did not want to be the feted white guest and yet I was in a culture that gives honour to those to teach and lead. The students would not let me wait in line for my food no matter how hard I tried... they wanted me to go first and they wanted to serve me. Nothing else felt right to them and nothing felt more wrong to me. But to insist would be yet another example of a white person making the rules.

I wanted a classroom that was a collaborative learning space where students would challenge and ask questions and take the learning where they needed it to go but whatever I tried the students were slow to question or intervene. Why? Out of habit? Out of respect? Out of fear?

What to do that we might understand one another? Fearful but trusting in the love that casts out fear I named the gaps. I named my goals.

Then we named the gaps. We named *our* goals. We made some ground rules, identifying the behaviours that would make it safe enough to be brave and the behaviours that we would have to exclude and call each other out on.

And then we laughed. And we learned. And there were moments like wind and like fire as something in each and between each burst into life and the miracle of communication happened... in which we began to find ourselves as brothers and sisters on interwoven paths towards the heart of God. Each seeing, each blinded, each in need of each other's help.

So as I draw to a close, three things:

First, for us in Britain, I think, the grandchildren of Empire (and maybe for others of us too), love requires not a withdrawal into a splendid isolation where in our minds we can still be kings of the castle, or even where we can beat our chests, but a humble patterning on the Christ who entrusted himself to human encounter for the sake of the whole inhabited earth.

Second, for Wesley House in Cambridge, I think it means acknowledging the part that Christianity has played in bolstering the hegemony of the West, of the white, of the patriarchal, of the hetero-normative and of the lie that truth is one. And it means changing our ways: recruiting staff from around the world who look at the global parish from other viewpoints; engaging in the hard work of encountering difference without trying to control one another as we pray together and live together in an intercultural residential community; seeking resources for teaching that are written by and for the majority world and not just by dead white men; paying attention to all the ways in which the playing field is not level, from raising scholarship money to enable majority world scholars to become the producers of knowledge and not just consumers, to identifying and making explicit the assumed ways of knowing and behaving that make stumbling blocks to shared learning and genuine relationship.

And, finally, my brothers and sisters, I think, for each of us here who has found some kind of safety, however precarious, within the boundaries of our own worlds, what is asked is that we take the risk of encounter with the other; that we co-create the ground rules that will make it safe enough for the most vulnerable to participate; and that we set our face against all that would undermine the full humanity of any sister or brother *because no-one has ever seen God; but if we love one another, God lives in us, and his love is perfected in us.*