

"Then Jesus said to his disciples, 'Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves, take up their cross and follow me. For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for my sake will save it.' Mt. 16:24-25

Introduction:

God has begun a new work among us. There are many signs of the activity of the Holy Spirit in our midst. New people are added to our family of faith regularly. We are gathering together in groups during the week to study the scriptures, to share and to pray together. We are reaching out to the community in service and love. God has begun a fresh work at Silverlake Community Church.

With this deepening of our community's relationship with God, however, come new responsibilities. We need to be intentional about some basic aspects of our relationship God, with each other and with our community, which will enable us to embody the love and character of our Lord Jesus. For reflecting Christ in our community is a challenge.

In 2 Corinthians 2 Paul describes the church as the pleasing aroma of Christ to God. Too often, however, the church has not been a fragrant aroma. Churches have grown in the ways that we are now experiencing. But the legacy of many churches has not been that of an fragrant aroma. Too often, in all honesty, the church has stunk.

We live in a community filled with people who have been hurt by the institutional church. In their experience has not been a fragrant aroma, but has smelled to high heaven. Given this legacy, we, as the church in Silver Lake, represent a threat rather than an example of the good news of God's love in Jesus Christ. This is a challenge. But it is a challenge which develops our calling in Silver Lake.

We are called to be a source of healing for our community. We are not

called to be a source of greater suffering. Therefore must overcome the stereotypes of the church as judgmental, as narrow-minded and as self-serving. We will do this by our quality of life with God, with each other and with the people in our community. We will do this by learning how to truly love and serve others with no strings attached. We have to get this right at Silverlake Church.

Move:

Young love is wonderful, isn't it? I remember my first love in 1976. A young girl in my elementary school caught my eye. She had a deformed hand and was unable to use scissors, and though I was not very good at cutting myself, I gladly helped her. Our relationship grew into playmates and soon enough there was talk of marriage. I gave her a plastic ring and we set the date for 1977. We would be 12 years old.

Later I experienced the power of love with a red headed girl from Glendora, CA. This this time I was quite a bit older. And that relationship resulted in our being married in 1989.

We can experience this power of young love in our relationship with God. In this time of young love with God the events of our lives work together to deepen our trust in God's care for us. Relationships, churches, and answered prayers work together to "feed us" and nurture us. We learn to accept ourselves because we are loved and forgiven, warts and all, in this new relationship we have with God through Jesus.

Paul began his "honeymoon" with Jesus when he left his work, his family and his community to follow Jesus. This is the beginning of love. The force of the experience of young love makes sacrifice easy. We let go of many things that were considered important in our lives so that we might have the love of the other. When we gain this love we have a heightened experience of life. We are drawn out of ourselves. As we focus on the other we find the hole in our own heart to be filled. Life is wonderful and powerfully emotional.

Young love is wonderful.

Move:

But such a beginning, in human relationships or in our relationship with God through Jesus Christ, is just that; a beginning. This experience of love is like the cream in milk. It is the beginning which gives firm foundation to our new relationship. But it necessarily gives way to the stuff of daily life. No one can live on cream. But we all need milk as we grow and mature.

Jesus weans all of his followers from young love in Matthew 16. "From that time on Jesus began to explain to his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things at the hands of the elders, the chief priests and the teachers of the law, and that he must be killed and on the third day raised to life." (21-22)

But Peter was not willing to let go of the first experiences of love. He took Jesus aside and began to rebuke him. "Never, Lord!" he said. "This shall never happen to you!"

We all do this with young love. We cling to the first stage of love. From disillusioned couples who are searching for that first spark they had at the beginning to "serial monogamists" who go from marriage to divorce to marriage to divorce in search of the flame of first love, we are drawn to recreate the beginnings of love. We even see this deep desire in our entertainment. Many television series have a love interest. More often than not the tension that is dragged out episode after episode as two lead characters are going to tie the knot, then become distant, then reconnect. They are always on the path to marriage, but never quite get there. We watch, we hope, and even though our hopes for the couple are dashed again and again, we keep watching and we smile.

Many of us live our lives with Jesus in the same way as the love interest in our favorite show. We make a commitment to Jesus. Then we grow apart. Then we come back to Jesus. Then we fall distant once again. We

expect God to constantly come back to us in a way that meets our needs, moves our goals forward, and reminds us in our weakness of God's love. But God is not entertained by this decision to stay immature in Christ. Rather than watching, hoping and smiling, God calls us to "grow up" in love. When we don't we move forward we become a pungent odor which is a counter-witness to the love of God.

Dr. David Bosch was a South African professor and pastor who worked quite a bit with missionaries. These missionaries had given up, not only their way of life, but their own country and culture to serve God. But as Bosch worked with a wide variety of missionaries he noticed that some of these people who had made such sacrifices were still quite self-indulgent. They were smug about their sacrifices for Christ. In the name of sacrifice they built relationships with the people in their new context which required their continued presence and care. And whenever something went wrong they were always convinced of their own innocence. How could they do something wrong when they had given up so much?

Bosch realized, upon reflection, that the problem wasn't sacrifice. These missionaries had made huge sacrifices for Christ. The problem was that they had chosen their sacrifice. They had chosen their sacrifice as a way of establishing their own sense of identity. In other words they had sacrificed so that others and God would respond to them in a certain way. They were sacrificing as a part of the "honeymoon" phase with God. And as a result, they smelled.

This has been happening, not just among missionaries in other countries, but in the churches of our own country. We have tried to stay in that young love relationship with God while working to obey harder passages of the Bible like ours today. As a result we are seen as people who sacrifice, but who sacrifice with strings attached. Our community is full of people who feel burned by the gap between the words of Jesus and the practice of the church.

We must be willing to let go of this "recycling" of the honeymoon with

Jesus and let love become mature in us. This means that we have to learn to accept ourselves solely on the basis of what God has done for us in Jesus Christ. Once we have accepted ourselves we must then sacrifice our freshly accepted self to Christ. We have to move from receiving love by faith to becoming love by sacrificing ourselves completely to God.

We must let go of "young love" and move forward into mature love. God is working to help us do just that.

Move:

Jesus will not let us continue to recycle young love. He wants us to become love.

"Jesus turned to Peter and said, 'Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to me; you do not have in mind the concerns of God, but merely human concerns.' Then Jesus said to his disciples, 'Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves, take up their cross, and follow me. For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for my sake will find it.'" (Mt. 16:24-25)

When God decides to teach us, not just to receive his love, but to become love, the events of our lives work together for a different purpose. Relationships, church experience, and prayers work together to humble us, to purify us, and to confront us with truths that must be faced if we are to become love. We are given greater responsibility over others in work, in church and in family. We have less time for ourselves, less time for introspection, and more challenges to make hard decisions without clear direction. We will have to override our emotions to follow in the path God has for us. We will feel at times as though we are dying. And, in fact, we are. God is bringing down our self-constructed sense of self in order to raise up a new sense of self centered upon the love of God in Jesus Christ. When this happens we have entered a difficult, but very important time in our relationship with God.

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become love.

Application:

I have learned three things that are essential as we go through this process.

1) Persevere. Our only job in this time is to continue to move forward with God. We will become frustrated and even angry with God when we try to interpret the events of our lives according to the honeymoon period rather than mature love. We will find ourselves, again and again, wanting things in our lives to work out in a way which affirms God's love for us in the same way they did before. When they do not we will worry that God does not love us. But we must persevere. God's love for us has not changed. The only thing that has changed is that God is no longer working to convince us of his love. He is, instead, working to make us love.

2) It is messy. This process does not follow the neat and tidy rules of cause and effect or of consistent increase. The Holy Spirit does not even complete one area of work in our lives before beginning upon another. Instead, like all relationships, it is a very organic, circular, complex, experience of moving two steps forward and three steps back. But as we persevere in worship, in study, in confession, in prayer; in committed relationships to the family of faith and service and love to the community around us, we will become love.

3) The struggle is love. This process is not about experiencing God's love because we persevere through the messiness. We become love, not by getting to the end of a process of struggle. We become love in the midst of the struggle itself. Think about it. We see love best, not when it is doled out by some unaffected person to "those poor and needy people who are not like them." Love is best expressed when someone with problems of their own jumps into the messiness of another persons life to care for them no matter the effect upon their own life. Just consider how God showed us his love in Christ. It was not by some

heaven enthroned Christ deigning to reach down and allow us helpless humans kiss his ring. He was birthed right into the midst of human life, lived and struggled among us, and was crucified as a common criminal. It was in the midst of the struggle that Jesus sought to teach us, to heal us, to save us. It was in the midst of the struggle that we saw most clearly how much God loves us. Love in our lives is expressed in the same way. The struggle is love.

Conclusion:

Brothers and sisters, God is doing a new work in our midst. He is drawing us together to show us that we can trust in his love as the source of our security. He is drawing us together around himself to give us meaning and purpose in our lives that we might spend our talents and our energy in ways which will always make sense regardless of the economic or political winds of our time.

But the time will come when he sends us out to serve others. He will wean us from this focus on receiving God's love and will begin his work to make us love. Let's be ready for this.

For our church has been brought together to heal those who have been hurt by the institutional church. Our church has been established in love to be a counter-witness to those who believe that the stereotypes of church are the extent of what the good news of Christ offers them. We will not become yet another group of Christians who stands in the way of people experiencing the love God has for them in Jesus Christ.

"We put no stumbling block in anyone's path, so that our ministry will not be discredited."
2 Corinthians 6:3

