

The readings this morning ought to be read in reverse order. This Sunday I see them almost shaped like a grape vine and we can travel upwards (or backwards?) through the texts.

John's gospel gives us Jesus' words about who he is, telling us that he is the vine and that we are the branches and that connected to each other, we are to bear good fruit, a good harvest. In the epistle, that second reading from first John, the fruit we are to bear is a harvest of love. The first reading from Acts lets us know that love in which we abide is always meant to reach beyond ourselves, spreading outward, as Philip encounters the Ethiopian eunuch. Rooted in Jesus, Philip helps the Ethiopian to understand what he the words from the prophet Isaiah and to hear the gospel. The good news, always rooted in Jesus' death and resurrection, always connected to the Father, spreads its tendrils. But always and only ever for love. One follows the other in our readings this morning.

The movie "Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind" has actor Jim Carrey play Joel to Kate Winslet's Clementine and tells a very non-linear story of their two year relationship. As with memories and feelings, it jumbles and jumps as the relationship and its effects moves back and forth.

After their relationship ends badly, Joel finds out that Clementine has engaged the services of a business called Lacuna and has undergone a procedure to have her memories of Joel erased. Slowly figuring that out, in his own heartbreak, Joel decides to undergo the same procedure. Before the erasing procedure happens, clients are able to "store" their memories on a tape and have it saved in their file at the company.

As Joel is undergoing the procedure, we are drawn into his and Clementine's relationship. We relive with Joel the times of confusion and conflict between them, but we also see them at their happier moments. Joel realizes he does not want to forget Clementine. As she is manifested in his memory and mind, Clementine tells Joel to hide her in memories that did not involve her. Desperately he hides her in his childhood memories so that she cannot be erased. As he does this, the procedure stops. The two

technicians who are performing the procedure call in the boss who has the skill at erasing Clementine from Joel's memory. The procedure begins again but not before Clementine tells Joel to meet her at the train station in Montauk - the place where they first met, where they were first drawn to each other, first fell in love.

Joel wakes up from the procedure his memories of Clementine erased. And we believe their story is over. Then on an impulse, something urging him and pushing him, Joel goes to Montauk and meets Clementine on the train ride back into the city. They are drawn to each other again, just as when they first met.

In a subplot all the client's tapes and files from Lacuna are mailed out and both Joel and Clementine receive their tapes. They realize what has happened - that they each chose to erase the other, the pain of heartbreak and memory - and they hear in their tapes their bitter memories of each other. The movie ends with them drawn to each other, agreeing to try it all over again, even knowing what they know.

If a pill or a procedure could erase your heartbreak, erase the hurt and grief, the pain and loss, would you take it?

The movie is about love that is romantic, but this morning we hear the word love twenty-eight times in the that passage that Steve read from first John. Love that gets repeated over and over again, a love that comes from God, a love that is incarnate, abiding, indwelling, transforming, a love that is God. We can't escape talking about love.

Author and theologian Frederick Buechner writes this definition of "love":

The first stage is to believe that there is only one kind of love. The middle stage is to believe that there are many kinds of love and that the Greeks had a different word for each of them. The last stage is to believe that there is only one kind of love.

Buechner goes on to define those different words the Greeks had:

The unabashed *eros* of lovers, the sympathetic *philia* of friends, *agape* giving itself away freely no less for the murderer than for his victim - these are all varied manifestations of a single reality. To lose yourself in another's arms, or in another's company, or in suffering for all [who] suffer, including the ones inflicting suffering upon you - to lose yourself in such ways is to find yourself. Is what it's all about. Is what love is. <sup>1</sup>

To love, though, is hard. There really is no human perfection in love, as the author of first John writes. Quite frankly, we mess up on it all the time. Whether that love is for our partner or spouse, our children, our friends, or the sister or brother in need, we know there are times we fail. John names it: we ought to love one another, meaning we don't always, and those who say "I love God" and hate their brothers or sisters are liars, meaning we can say one thing and then do the opposite.

We often think the opposite of love is hate, but they are really two sides of the same coin - both sides are passion and emotion and actions born out of those emotions. More importantly, what John identifies in the text as a stumbling block to love is not actually hate, it's not even apathy, it is fear.

Fear cuts us from love, from reaching out in love, from growing in love. To love, any kind of love, is to take personal risk, to leave yourself open and vulnerable to imperfect and finite human beings. Fear whispers into our hearts such things like rejection, highlights our inadequacies and short-comings, reminds us of hurts, projects a future of finding ourselves alone.

But to let fear have the last word is to forget where and to whom we are rooted. To let fear override our emotions and our actions is to forget the gift of love we have first been given and our responsibility with that gift. And so

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<sup>1</sup> Wishful Thinking: A Theological ABC, Frederick Buechner, Harper & Row, 1973

we begin worship these Sundays of Easter with memories of our baptism, that even though the memories might be lost to us, to keep reminding ourselves that through the waters of rebirth and growth we can never be cut off or separated from the source that is love.

Our place is as branches on the vine, connected to Jesus who has shown us and given us God's love. To be a branch is to allow the sunshine and water to nourish us so that we will bear good fruit. To be a branch is to let the vine grower prune us for our growth's sake, so that we have the energy to move beyond ourselves and to offer what we have first been given, imperfect as it may be.

“Of all powers, love is the most powerful and the most powerless. It is the most powerful because it alone can conquer that final and most impregnable stronghold which is the human heart. It is the most powerless because it can do nothing except by consent.”<sup>2</sup>

In Jesus, God takes the risk, becoming vulnerable, for us, loving us first, hoping to take up residence in our hearts and in our memory, abiding in us no matter our fear, kindling itself again when we forget. In Christ, through dying and rising, the last word is always “love.”

Amen.

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<sup>2</sup> Wishful Thinking: A Theological ABC, Frederick Buechner, Harper & Row, 1973