

Stepping Down Into Love

A Sermon by Donald Mackenzie
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Text: Be still before the Lord and wait patiently before him. Psalm 37:7a
Readings: Psalm 37; I Corinthians 13:4, 5

Love is patient; love is kind. These are two things that love is, Paul says, but they stand in contrast to four things that love is not: envious, boastful, arrogant or rude. And they also stand in contrast to three things that love does not do because it is patient and kind. It does not insist on its own way. It is not resentful, it is not rude. Love is patient and love is kind.

Notice as you listen to this chapter from Corinthians this fall that the word “God” is not mentioned. But there is no question in Paul’s mind that the word Love points directly to God. God is love. The only love in the world is God. But this love that Paul talks about has a specific meaning and its meaning is what this chapter is about and distinguishes the love that is God from our other uses of love as in, “I just love cherries,” or, “I love to swim in the ocean.” Those are good things, but there is a distance between their meanings and the “I love you” in the love that is God in this chapter from I Corinthians.

In fact, there is a barrier between our casual use of love and its deeper meaning. We are often and always trying to get through that barrier to get to Love. What drives us to try to move through that barrier is the feeling of being incomplete. About 80 years ago, Carl Jung the great Swiss psychiatrist wrote of a visit to North Africa where he encountered an Arab in the desert. The Arab, he said, was unselfconsciously the person he had always been. The European, in contrast is characterized by what he called *le sentiment d’encomplimentitude*, a feeling of being incomplete, a feeling illustrated by rockets and that great concept, progress. While the details were different then, different from now, the idea is the same. There is a difference between a sense of being centered in one’s one being, in one’s life, in one’s universe, on the one hand, and on the other hand, that sense that if we just had that one more thing, if we could just do things a little faster, if we could just have more control, if we could just take it one more step, if we could just...actually the list is endless, but the goal is the same.

But this is not a new concern. Psalm 37 and many of the other psalms contain this theme of being still and being patient. These psalms were probably written about 500 BCE, or about 2500 years ago. And they were told and sung for hundreds of years before that. Clearly, this need is a part of human experience at least as far back as our tradition goes, which is about 4000 years back to the time of Abraham. If we could just be omnipotent and have some control over certainty and uncertainty, we could find that inner peace, that serenity that we long for. In this mode, we combat noise with more noise, we combat impatience with more impatience, we combat going to extremes by going to more extremes, we combat speed with greater speed. This tendency is clearly a fact of life. In life we can find that serenity that Jung observed in the Arab—whether it

was really true is irrelevant—we want it and we can find it. Or, we just keep on adding to the chaos and noise on the surface becoming more and more frustrated with the energy and time it takes to get nowhere and actually move backward. We come to worship on Sunday, out of breath and praying for relief. That's our world here in Seattle.

When was the last time someone said to you, "Be still?" When was the last time you heard the words, "Be still?" When the last time you even thought of being still? These are words we hear rarely though our longings for Sabbath peace are deep. We may believe that there is no way out of this situation.

How do we cope with that? It's a place where we don't want to be. Often it is a place where we are stuck and it's a place where we even feel trapped—no exit, no way to escape. Don't forget this is the theme writ large of the Exodus—getting out of Egypt is a metaphor that points to that deep inner need to feel free, to feel complete and to feel centered and serene. That's why we like rhythmic music. And on the guitar, it sounds like this (play this little light of mine.) We sang that at the picnic last Sunday and we have sung it in church many times and when we sing songs like that and other songs, we are even moved to clap after they are over because getting out of Egypt feels so good! Oh yes, this is getting out of Egypt music. I like this music and I love to play and sing it. And I too love the feeling it brings.

But there are other ways to get through that barrier that separates us from Love, that barrier I am calling the feeling of being incomplete. There are other ways that can be illustrated through music and the one I am about to use is, in some ways, almost too obvious, but I wanted to use something that would give you a clear sense of what stepping down into Love might sound and feel like. Here's a verse from a song called "This Old Guitar." (sing) By the way this old guitar was made in 1953 and I bought it in 1962, so everything in that verse is true for me—which, is one of the reasons I like it. But I like it more because of that reminder it brings that we can, in fact, step down into love, step through that barrier, that illusion of the feeling of being incomplete—after all God has, in fact, given us what we need as people on this earth.

I want to close by suggesting two ways right now that we can start or restart the process of stepping down into Love as we think about taking Love to hard places. The first is what we are calling Christian formation. We are using that word formation for two reasons: first because it suggests a shaping that is important. Education has come to mean something that contains drudgery and unnecessary suffering. Formation, on the other hand is something that, as it shapes us, gives us the sense that we are complete and we have what we need to step down through the barrier into Love through practices, and other spiritual exercises including this weekly worship of God.

The second is an opportunity we have because Loyce Mbewa Ongudi has recently returned from her village of Rabuor in Kenya in Africa. Earlier this summer Marcia McCracken was with Loyce and worshipped at Loyce's home church, St. Matthew's parish in Rabuor and has brought back stories for us to help us to shape a relationship with that parish. In the past when churches such as ours did this, it was with the assumption that we had something to offer them, material goods and a way of understanding experience that would help to bring people in places like Africa into the modern world. But while we do have the opportunity to offer Rabuor material assistance, today the shoe is on the other foot. We have much to learn from a culture that can still praise God and laugh and sing in face of catastrophic loss from AIDS and the constant

reminder of those losses in the form of the children whose parents have died. These people have a formation, these people have stepped down into Love, these people brothers and sisters have in them the capacity to believe that they are complete, they have what they need. Christian formation and the people of Rabuor Village are just two of the ways that we have to step down into Love, to get beneath the chaos or urban life and feel that Love that is in each one of us. Amen.