

An Epidemic of Good news # 10

Greetings, sisters and brothers in Christ! I am Pastor Curtis Aguirre of Our Redeemer Lutheran Church, here in Penticton, British Columbia, and this is the tenth instalment of “An Epidemic of Good News,” a devotional Bible study on Paul’s letter to the Philippians. Let’s begin with a prayer.

God, grant us the serenity to accept the things we cannot change, courage to change the things we can, and wisdom to know the difference. Amen.

(Reinhold Niebuhr, original version of Serenity Prayer)

In Philippians 4:4-7 it says:

Rejoice in the Lord always; again, I will say, rejoice! Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near. Do not worry about anything, but in everything, by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving, let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. (Philippians 4:4-7)

“Rejoice always? Don’t worry about anything?” Well, that’s fine as long as you’re living a secure middle-class life in a house with emotionally stable people in a country with a benign form of government. But what about someone in an abusive relationship? What about people living in a hostile dictatorship or in the midst of a civil war?

In this video I want to go deeper into the aspect of Paul’s and Jesus’ teaching that promotes gentleness, forgiveness, and servanthood, and examine it against the backdrop of a sometimes hostile and abusive world. Another way to put it would be as a title: Living the Christian Ethic of Love in the Midst of an Abusive World.

To get into the subject, we need to ask two related questions: “What is love?” and “How do I love in the face of violence?” We also have to become wise enough to know the difference between what we can do something about, and what is beyond our control.

First, what is love? When I say “love” in this context, what I’m talking about is “agapē”. The Greek of the New Testament has several words for love: eros, philia, storgē, and agapē. Each of them means something different, even if in English we use the same word to translate all of them.

All of the loves that have to do with warm feelings, sexual attraction, family loyalty, and so on are tied up in the first three words. Agapē has a specific meaning: it is the decision to serve the other. When Paul writes his famous words about love:

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Love is patient. Love is kind. Love is not envious, or boastful, or arrogant, or rude. It does not insist on its own way. It is not irritable, or resentful. It does not rejoice in wrongdoing but rejoices in the truth. It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. (1 Corinthians 13:4-7)

He is not talking about romantic love, or ordinary friendship, or familial love. The word he is using is “agapē”: the decision to serve the other, whether I like them or not, whether I’m friends with them or not, whether I’m related to them or not. It’s not a feeling, it’s a decision. Or, another way to think of it is; the other loves are of the heart; agapē is of the will.

So, when I ask, “How do I love in the face of violence?” I am not asking, how do I have warm fuzzy feelings for the people oppressing me? What I am asking is, how do I serve them?

As you may remember, Jesus and Paul taught in very different situations. Jesus taught in a country occupied by a foreign power in which there was a strong undercurrent of resistance. His main audience were subsistence farmers, fisher folk, day labourers, and slaves, but he also addressed the wealthy, tax collectors (who would have been seen as collaborators), the religious authorities, and even some of the occupiers themselves, like the centurion who asked to have his servant healed (Matthew 8:5-13).

It was a charged, polarized environment—not unlike Israel and the Middle East today. Many people hoped for a righteous king—an heir of David anointed by God—to come and set things right.

You can see Jesus addressing this in the Sermon on the Mount. His injunctions to turn the other cheek, to go the extra mile, and to love your enemies in Matthew 5:38-48 all have to be seen against this backdrop. Think again about those three teachings and imagine them in a context of foreign occupation where the big picture is out of your control. You only have control over yourself and your behaviour with the people you encounter. How do you serve others in that environment?

A Roman soldier comes and for whatever reason, slaps you. What do you do? Do you cower? Do you plead for mercy? Do you hit back? Or do you stand up and turn the other cheek? Each of these responses communicates something different. To cower or plead for mercy makes you seem snivelling and weak. It reinforces the Roman idea that you and your people are miserable losers. To fight back is an invitation to beat you, imprison you, and kill you, and maybe your family too. But to stand calmly, with dignity, that is something different. Now the Roman must make a moral choice. You may help the Roman to see you and your people as people rather than victims. Maybe. Certainly, the Roman centurion who asked Jesus to heal his servant had become friends with the locals.

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Roman soldiers had the right to make locals carry their packs for one Roman mile. A Roman soldier does this to you. What do you do? Resist? Run away? Complain? Or do you give more than was commanded? If you do the first three, you will be beaten or even killed. If you do the last one, the Roman soldier has no charge against you. In fact, he might get in trouble for breaking the rules because you're going more than a mile. Now he takes the burden from you to give to someone else. He comes away thinking, "You know, those Judeans and Galileans are pretty decent people. Kind of like back home."

The Romans are your enemies. If you hate them, what good does that do? It eats you up inside, but it does nothing to improve the situation. Why not just love your enemies as God loves them and move on with your life? Remember, that doesn't mean, feel warm and fuzzy about them, but it does mean to treat them decently and serve in the best, most life-giving, dignity-preserving way you know how.

Jesus was speaking to a particular situation. He was teaching people how to love in a politically charged situation. Once we take these teachings and carry them over into our personal lives or workplaces, we have to consider the difference. We can't just say, "Jesus said it, so I just have to do it."

To make that translation to your own situation, it is good to ask yourself, "Can I change anything about this situation? What is my responsibility here?"

So, you are in an abusive relationship. Your partner strikes you. What do you do? Do you cower? Do you plead for mercy? Do you hit back? Do you stand up and turn the other cheek? Or do you get yourself out of there and flee to safety? What do you have control over? The last thing you want to do is drive the cycle of violence. But you are not helping yourself or the other person by staying in the relationship.

And that brings me to an important principle that I use to think about what love is. Jesus said (quoting Isaiah):

The spirit of the Lord is upon me because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour. (Luke 4:18-19)

Love liberates from slavery and captivity. To show love to someone is to free them and to free myself. Anything that we call "love" that enslaves one person to another is no love at all; it is just manipulation.

You have to think of this like substance abuse and addiction. The abuser is addicted to a toxic way of being that brings harm to others. Unfortunately, with addiction, the addict usually has to hit rock bottom—often a near death experience—before they have enough inner

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motivation to try to kick the habit. If you just keep giving the addict what he or she wants, you're not helping them. You are not serving them. Can you change the situation? Only if you get out. And that may bring about its own set of problems and dangers. There are no easy answers, but there are organizations out there ready to help; ready to serve you.

Remember also that Jesus said:

The light has come into the world, and people loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil. For all who do evil hate the light and do not come to the light so that their deeds may not be exposed. (John 3:19-20)

Abusers must hide their deeds. Part of their strategy is to keep the victim from reaching out. This fact points to the evil that is inherent in the abuse. Jesus' comes to bring light, to reveal, to free from slavery and captivity.

So, back to Paul: Paul writes those beautiful words about love:

Love is patient. Love is kind. Love is not envious, or boastful, or arrogant, or rude. It does not insist on its own way. It is not irritable, or resentful. It does not rejoice in wrongdoing but rejoices in the truth. It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. (I Corinthians 13:4-7)

For someone in an abusive relationship, this is poison. So why did Paul write this? Well, as I said a few videos ago, Paul is speaking to a particular audience very different from the one Jesus was addressing; and Paul has specific goals in mind for the groups he is writing to.

These are city people. His congregations are made up of a mix of diaspora Jews, Greeks, and Roman colonists. Socially they are merchants, slaves, probably some trades people, and maybe some urban toughs trying to turn their lives around, like the thief in Ephesus who had to be reminded to stop stealing (Ephesians 4:28). Greece had also been conquered by Rome, and two hundred years earlier had risen up and been crushed. But by the time of Paul, the Greeks had accommodated themselves to Roman rule. Actually, life was pretty good in Greece by this time.

Paul is not trying to help people navigate a hostile occupation, or an abusive relationship, for that matter. He is trying to help people live together in a community of faith.

So, imagine you are in a congregation. You have a big disagreement with someone about something that is important to both of you. What do you do? Do you argue? Do you draw a line in the sand? Do you have a fist fight? Do you gossip and get people to hate your opponent? Do you try to work it out?

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Well, Paul's first bit of advice is, don't insist on your own way. Don't get irritated. And certainly, don't do anything unethical or hateful.

What do you have control over? What can you let go of? The main thing is faith in Christ, everything else is window dressing.

Here Paul's Great Kenotic Hymn makes a lot of sense:

Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not consider equality with God as something to be taken advantage of, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death—even death on a cross.

Therefore God highly exalted him and gave him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father. (Philippians 2:5-11)

You let go of any sense of entitlement and you serve God with all your might.

Now here's the challenge. When we take this and try to use it in a situation of political oppression or in an abusive relationship, we end up trying to squeeze a round peg into a square hole. We have to step back and ask ourselves: How do I translate and transfer guidance meant for one situation over into another?

The Great Kenotic Hymn describes the inner spiritual movement that we are meant to make. We are meant to leave any inner sense of entitlement behind in order to serve God. Remember, Jesus became obedient to God, not to some oppressive tyrant, and not to some abusive partner.

Love—agapë, the decision to serve the other—is the practical application in the material world of this inner movement of emptying ourselves to be filled with God. I serve the other because I serve God.

But my love for God is not just agapë love. It is all of the other loves too, as I said in a previous video. All of our earthly forms of love come together in our love for God. It is an intense and all-consuming love that gives us the strength to serve the other. The larger love for God enables the smaller for our neighbours. We love, because God first loved us (I John 4:19).

**So, to sum up:
Love means to serve the other.**

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That love looks different in different contexts. Jesus and Paul addressed different audiences and different social contexts. Remember that.

Genuine love liberates on both sides of the relationship; and any love that enslaves is not love, it's just manipulation.

You're not helping an abuser when you let them abuse.

Figure out what you can control and change, and what you can't, because that will shape the way you apply love practically.

So Paul's words In Philippians 4:4-7 are clear:

Rejoice in the Lord always; again, I will say, rejoice! Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near. Do not worry about anything, but in everything, by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving, let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. (Philippians 4:4-7)

These are words for a community of faith, striving to work together to embody God's love. All of their concerns they are to give to God and trust in God. By having this attitude they will build up their community in the peace that comes from God.

I'll be taking a two-week break from making videos, but when I return in the next instalment of "An Epidemic of Good News," we'll look at some of the textual issues with the letter to the Philippians—the kind of thing Biblical scholars love to discuss.

Let's close with the Lord's Prayer:

**Our Father, who art in heaven,
Hallowed be thy name.
Thy kingdom come,
Thy will be done,
On earth as it is in heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread,
And for give us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us.
And lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil.
For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, forever and ever. Amen.**