

Surrender To Love...

Richard Dawson

13 Sept 2009

1 John 4⁷⁻²¹

The key to swimming is surrender. One cannot cope with water unless one is prepared to surrender to its nature. Fighting against water is the surest way to sink. Rather one must accept its nature and then use that to make progress. The same is true of love. Both to receive and to give love requires of us a certain surrender without which we make little progress.

The human heart cries out for love, it is perhaps the defining question of our lives – ‘Am I loved?’ ‘Does someone love me; with all my weakness and failings, does someone still love me?’ We so desperately need love because, as the Bible makes clear, we so desperately need God. We were made for God, to enjoy God, to know God and as our reading makes clear this morning, God is love. In His character, in His action, in His Spirit, He is love.

And the Church is created to reflect that love, to embody that love, to express that love, to deliver that love. And we do this by loving each other; by creating a community of love, and then by taking that love to a very needy world – by loving that which God has died to love – the world. The two parables we heard this morning embody these primary values.

The story of the prodigal son can be seen as a story about the Church’s internal life – how we treat our own; how we love our own – even when they completely reject the things we believe in and choose to live away from us. God says to us – rejection is not an option. The son is not a stranger – he is a part of the family even when he is far from the Father. Our love for one another needs to be of this quality. When the world sees how much we love each other it will, again, be attracted to the Church.

But we must also love the world and the story of the Good Samaritan answers the question ‘Are we only to love each other? The answer is a resounding **‘No!’** We are to love the world as God does. John 3v16 says quite clearly **‘For God so loved the world...’** We sometimes forget the plain meaning of these words. It’s there, however, in black and white. God **loves** the world and gave Himself for it. And so the question this must raise for us is, how are we loving the world? Perhaps the best illustration of this in Jesus’ preaching comes in this story. A story almost perfectly designed to offend every kind of Jewish piety. And it does so because firstly Israel is pictured as a violent place – a place of thieves and bullies. A man travelling on a main road between two capital cities is beaten and robbed in broad daylight. It then puts the most religious of people in the place of the anti-hero – the person who doesn’t do the right thing, who shrinks from their duty. Finally it places a cultural outcast as the hero – the one who did the right thing and who showed both courage and kindness. Nothing could be more offensive to the Jewish religious authorities. In telling this story Jesus forever defines our neighbour **not as the one with whom we have something in common** but as the one with whom we have **little in common** – one who is, for all intents and purposes – **of the world!** The Church then is designed for one purpose and is given two strategies. The one purpose is to embody the love of God in its life for all to see. The two strategies are to demonstrate

love internally – a powerful witness which will attract people to its life – and, secondly, to love the world, a place with which it has little in common, in a manner again which is so compelling that God is revealed and people are converted. And this is largely where we finished last time...

But this begs the question, doesn't it, of what does this love look like? And, of course, the answers provided are as varied as the people asking the question. Our own culture will offer anything from a one night stand to a 60 year old marriage; a heterosexual marriage to a civil union between two people of the same sex; a slow death in a hospice to a quick one chosen by the sufferer; a light smack to a parenting regime regulated by no physical intervention. And we could debate these things till the cows come home. So the culture doesn't answer the question for us. **How shall we love?** What does love mean? What does it call us to? What does it imply in regard to our lives?

The first thing we should deal with in this regard is what might be called a 'naturalistic fallacy' in regard to love and this is that we all really know what love is and how to love because it is '**natural**' – it is a part of who we are as human beings. Now I think you **can** find some wonderful examples of natural love; the love of a man for a woman, or a mother for a child, of a soldier for his fellow soldier. But along with the stories of wonderful love there exist for each of these examples many examples of something quite the opposite – of a man treating his wife abominably or vice versa; of a mother rejecting her child and of a soldier acting in complete cowardice and deserting their fellow soldiers. The Bible also knows of both also. It knows we can demonstrate amazing love and the opposite and its verdict is that, whether we know how to love or not, we cannot be relied upon to remain consistent. As the prophet Jeremiah wrote...

⁹The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately corrupt; who can understand it? (Jer 17)

The human heart left to its own devices cannot be relied on to love. We are not natural lovers. We are naturally quite inconsistent and even when we start well with love we so often run out of steam. **We need help!** The Bible is quite clear about this. We need help with love but how to get it? Where to get it? When it comes to this question don't go to the Bible looking for a 'how to' manual in regard to love. You just won't find it. The Bible, at least according to my reading of it, doesn't set out to teach us how to love. It doesn't find love's possibility in education. Rather it sets out what love means and then it simply says 'DO it!' 'Obey the imperative to love!' 'Love and you will be with God!' 'Love and you will become mature.' No particular set of skills is required, so it seems, to love. No particular personality does love better than another. Rather we have two approaches to love. The first is... **love does this...**

⁴Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant ⁵or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; ⁶it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth. ⁷It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. (1 Cor 13)

And now you should love... **⁷Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God; everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. ⁸Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love. ⁹God's love was revealed among us in this way: God sent his only Son into the world so that we might live through him. ¹⁰In this is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins. 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. (1 John 4)**

What on earth is going on here? God knows our inadequacy. He knows how difficult love is for us and yet His only instruction remains – **love does this so do it!** Do we get no more help than this? Are we left to our own completely inconsistent set to skills and motivations? **How then can we love!?**

Two things need to be said at this point. The first is that, in fact, the judgement of scripture is not that we're incapable of love but that we're unwilling to love. The problem with human love lies largely within our motivation. The obvious question then is, can God fix this? The answer provided by both parables is yes **but only if we're prepared to be loved first!**

Surrender to love is required if we are to find healing for a heart that does not want to love. Now why it does not want to love is worthy of another sermon or two but let's just say that one of the effects of sin is to require or desire things that belong to God to be ours. And one of those things that belongs to God is the love He has for all Creation. Humans do an interesting thing with this love and, indeed, with all love. They seek to make it something that originates with them so that it is not enough to be loved but we desire also to be worthy of that loved – to have earned that love. It is not enough for the human heart to be loved, we also demand to be lovable! All vanity is based around this distortion of love. Yes I am loved but I also want the reason for that love to be based within myself. However, love, like grace, works from the gift backwards. Loved that has to be earned is no love at all.

The common thread that unites both parables is surrender. The prodigal son had to surrender to the Father's love before he could really understand it. The man beaten by robbers met God's love when he became a victim and was forced to surrender to the love of a stranger who was, at least by race and culture, an enemy. Both had to be in a place of surrender to know the love of God. Both were unable to **earn** that love. Both were ready to receive it. Surrender is a mark of true love. God's love will be found where people are willing to surrender to it. Now I've said that the parable of the Good Samaritan speaks of God's love for the world and that the parable of the Prodigal Son speaks of God's love for the Church. Which central character do you think found it harder to surrender – the man who was beaten or the son? [Yes, the Son!]

We who are 'in the family' so to speak are often the ones who forget how to surrender to the love of God. You see surrender isn't something we do once. Rather when we surrender to God we enter into a **relationship of surrender**. We begin a life's journey in surrender. Surrender to God – surrender to love.

All love requires surrender whether we are the ones who are giving or receiving. We cannot love another simply as we want nor are we loved simply as we want. Both the giver and the receiver need to be prepared to surrender. Any long term loving relationship will come up against this fact. To love another we must be prepared to understand how they can best receive love.

Likewise, to be loved requires surrender to the lover. There is a certain giving away of oneself, a required vulnerability always on behalf of the one who is loved. Anyone getting married knows this instinctively I suspect. They know that they are giving themselves away when they say 'I do.' They can no longer simply be and independent 'I' but they must now think for two, act for two and plan for two. And at the altar they publicly do this; they surrender to the other, not so much to lose themselves but to find love.

God invites us to surrender to His love today. He invites us to **be loved**. The question for us is '**will we?**' Will we allow God to love us? Will we stand still long enough to be loved? Will we give up the demand to be lovable? Will we give away our vain attempts to **be worthy**.

