

The Feast of John Henry Newman (Evensong)
2/25/18
All Saints, Brookline

Psalm 48
Song of Songs 3.1-4
John 8.12-19

Desire to Love

Now, I'd like to take a moment to reassure you, we did not mix up the pages of a romance novel with the first lesson this evening. It's not often we hear the poetry of the book of Songs in our worship. Frequently interpreted as an allegory of the love between Jesus and the Church, this is the only book of the Bible that neither mentions or presupposes God. As womanist theologian Renita Weems puts it, this is the story of "the passionate, bewitching, vacillating, and unpredictable character of human love."¹

*By night on my bed
I sought him whom my soul loveth:
I sought him, but found him not;*

At first glance, this seems a bit of an odd choice of Scripture to celebrate the feast day of John Henry Newman. Known best in the Anglican tradition for his leadership in the Oxford Movement, he was dedicated to renewing the spirituality and doctrinal orthodoxy of the Church of England. His efforts were not in vain and we have Newman and the other leaders of the movement to thank for our vested choir, liturgical colors to represent each season, candles on the altar, and gospel processions.

Prior to his significant impact in the Oxford Movement, Newman's spiritual influence was substantial at the Oxford University Church of Saint Mary the Virgin where he was the vicar. He was especially known for his preaching. In one of these sermons in particular, he laid out his understanding of Christian love. In opposition to a more common understanding, Newton suggests that love is not diffusive and meant to be distributed equally among all people. Love for many is not superior to love of one or two, but these two things *are* connected.

"Now I shall here maintain, in opposition to such notions of Christian love, and with our Saviour's pattern before me," he preached, "that the best preparation for loving the

¹ Carol A. Newsom and Sharon H. Ringe, *Women's Bible Commentary*, expanded ed. (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1998), 166.

world at large, and loving it duly and wisely, is to cultivate an intimate friendship and affection towards those who are immediately about us.”²

He goes on to stipulate that loving our friends is our preparation and practice for loving all humanity. By beginning with a close circle, we learn to love well and gradually that circle can be enlarged to encompass our neighbors, all Christians, and finally, all humanity.

*‘I will rise now and go about the city in the streets,
and in the broad ways
I will seek him whom my soul loveth:
I sought him, but I found him not.*

But, can we overcome the vacillating and unpredictable nature of human love? Can we really ever love all humanity, or even all Christians?

There are over 8,000 homeless individuals in Boston. Over 8,000. A number large enough that I can’t begin to wrap my brain around it. But, I *can* know Tommy. I *can* pray with Melissa. I *can* have a conversation with Stacy. Over 8,000 is too big, but I am practicing and preparing to meet those I may encounter on the street in the relationships I deepen every week. As many of you know, I’ve been spending these past 6 months working as an intern with *common cathedral*, an outdoor church for people experiencing homelessness and their friends. One of the programs I’ve been part of, CityReach, is an opportunity for youth to come and learn directly from individuals who are homeless. Not long after they arrive on Friday night, we begin with an icebreaker. An icebreaker that helps them to break down this enormous, overwhelming problem of homelessness into individual people that they can begin to know. Because over 8,000 people is just too big for any of us to connect to. Loving all humanity, or even all Christians, is just too big for any of us to connect to.

We see a pattern of widening circles of love through the life of Jesus as well. He begins his ministry of love by calling a small group of disciples to follow him. A group that he showers with special attention, whom he teaches, travels with, serves with, and loves. A group that he admonishes, gets frustrated with, and that stretches his patience at times. And yet, even within this select group he has a favorite, the one the Gospel of John refers to as the “disciple whom Jesus loved.”

Perhaps this seems familiar to you. It’s definitely a pattern I can identify in my life. It’s by walking in the light of Jesus, that we too can learn to tame this passionate, bewitching, vacillating, and unpredictable human love. In starting small, we too can learn to love others wisely and well. By trying to love our families and our friends, learning to solve

² John Henry Newman, “Love of Relations and Friends,” in *Parochial and Plain Sermons*, vol. 2, in the Newman Reader, <http://www.newmanreader.org> (accessed February 20, 2018).

disagreements and compromise, responding to occasional crankiness with kindness, offering support in times of distress, and sharing joy in moments of success we begin to develop a practice of love. A practice that will grow and stretch to include more and more of humanity.

*The watchmen that go about the city found me:
to whom I said,
Saw ye him whom my soul loveth?*

This love song presents a sense of urgency that strikes me as important in seeking to form a habit of love. An urgency that we can live out each day, each week, as we come together as a church community- individuals from many walks of life with different personalities, different skills, different circumstances outside of this building. We welcome the crying babies and the exhausted parents, the joyful and the grumpy, the young adults with their smartphones and those who remember dialing a rotary phone.

Together we practice loving the person sitting in the pew next to us each week.
Together we practice loving our friends at coffee hour.
Together we practice loving each other, so that we may gradually widen our circle of affection.