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All About Love

1 John 3:16

During the years that I served as a pastor in Dallas, Texas my suburban congregation participated in a downtown street ministry that was organized by First Presbyterian Church. It was called the Stew Pot. This program fed the homeless a hot meal every day and provided basic medical care and social services. We wanted our young people to be part of that ministry which demonstrated so well that people of faith can come together and respond effectively to those in need.

When our youth walked through the Stew Pot entrance at the back of the church complex, they were always greeted by a sign that said, "Justice is love distributed." The pastor of another suburban church in Dallas during those years has written of the power of that sign in forming the values of the youth of his congregation. This is what he said:

Over the years I've noticed that many of the young people who participated in the Stew Pot have become social workers, counselors, and leaders of conscience in their congregations and communities. I think there is a direct connection between the sign I saw at First Presbyterian Church of Dallas and the vocations those young people chose as adults. They had seen justice in personal terms, as an extension of love, as a distribution of God's love, and they came to understand love as something tangible and powerful (Michael Jenkins, Christian Century, April 18, 2012, page 21).

Seeing that sign and learning how the homeless were assisted through the Stew Pot helped these young people understand what the biblical writer meant in 1 John 3:16. There we read, "We know love by this, that Jesus laid down his life for us – and we ought to lay down our lives for one another." The community of faith formed by Jesus is all about love.

This is exactly the conclusion that Peter draws in the fourth chapter of the Book of Acts. There we read that Peter encounters a homeless man on the streets of Jerusalem who is lame. The man has no choice but to beg those who pass by for a handout in order to meet his basic needs. Peter responds by giving the man the only thing he has. He reaches out in love to heal the lame man in the name of Jesus Christ. Peter understands this response as the distribution of the love of Christ to one who is in desperate need. But this love is so powerful it creates a major disturbance on the streets. This particular beggar is a fixture at the main gate leading to the temple. Many people know how crippled he has always been. Seeing him made whole galvanizes the crowd on the streets. When they find out that Peter is responsible for this they press hard for an explanation.

This is for Peter a preaching moment that is too good to pass up. A huge throng gathers to listen causing the flow of traffic and the patterns of commerce to be disrupted. When word of this situation gets back to the authorities, Peter and his co-workers are arrested for disturbing the peace. They are hauled before the Sanhedrin, the governing council in Jerusalem. This case is a matter of some importance for them because Peter's healing and preaching activities have attracted thousands of people to this new movement. The city leaders see this as a mass movement which poses a clear threat to their authority.

When Peter and the others are brought in to explain themselves the question that is put to them is, “By what power or by what name did you do this(Acts 4:7)?” This is a question that betrays the concern of the high priest and the other authorities to maintain their positions of power during difficult times. The followers of Christ did not get a permit to hold a rally. They never asked permission to work the streets in this way. To the authorities this is beginning to look like an insurrection. For them it is all about power.

Peter’s response to the authorities demonstrates a very different way of seeing the world. The only name that matters for Peter is the name of Jesus. Jesus is the one who rejected political power. Jesus refused to be the political and military messiah that all his contemporaries were looking for. Instead he embraced the role of the suffering messiah described in Isaiah. Jesus was a messiah who laid down his life to demonstrate the power of love. When Peter announces that the lame man has been healed in the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, he is saying that this is not about political power. It is all about love. This is how God is working in the world. Peter has taken the political question posed by the authorities and given it a theological answer. Peter wants to talk about how God is responding to the brokenness of our world. He challenges the authorities to think less about grasping for power and more about distributing love.

The obvious response of the Sanhedrin that day would have been to launch a political repression of the fledgling Christian movement. There was nothing to prevent them from using the levers of political power that were at their disposal. They could easily have the apostles jailed or executed. They could outlaw all gatherings of the new movement. But this is not what they did. Instead they listened to a voice of moderation. One of the leaders of the Sanhedrin was a man named Gamaliel. He was no follower of Jesus but he counseled against the repression of the Christian movement. He challenged his colleagues to think theologically about what was happening. He called them to be open to the possibility that God might be moving in ways that they do not understand. In time the truth will be revealed. In time they will learn if these Christians have God’s blessing for their emphasis on the distribution of love.

Kathleen Norris tells the story of a Benedictine sister who was sitting at the bedside of her dying mother. She was struggling to offer to her mother some words of comfort in her last hours. She said, “In heaven everyone we love is there.” But her mother responded with a different take on heaven. She said, “No, in heaven I will love everyone who’s there.” She understood that heaven is the place where she will be transformed to fulfill the mission Christ has given her(Amazing Grace: Vocabulary of Faith, page 367). In heaven we will be changed into people who can live by the truth of the Stew Pot sign. There we shall know that is it indeed all about love.