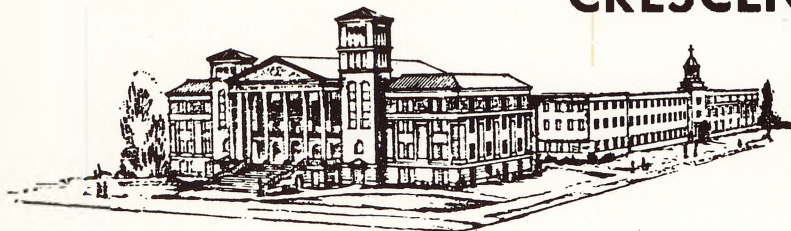


CRESCENT HILL BAPTIST CHURCH

SERMONS

"THE FREEDOM LOVE REQUIRES"



Sunday Evening, February 3, 1963
Crescent Hill Baptist Church
Louisville, Kentucky
John R. Claypool

Scriptural Reference: Luke 15:11-24

Eric Fromm has written an important little book called The Art of Loving. As you begin to read it, you realize that the title was no accidental afterthought. One of the author's main theses is that love is an art to be learned, a capacity that must be consciously cultivated. He points out convincingly that one of our greatest modern problems is a misunderstanding of this very fact. In the Western world particularly, we tend to think of love as an instinctive and almost deterministic process. Consider, for example, the phrase that is popularly used; we speak of "falling in love." What is the act of falling? It is what happens automatically when you get into a certain situation. If you step out of a third story window into mid-air, without any conscious effort you fall! And this is precisely the way many people regard the love-process. They are always looking for the "right" situation - that "certain someone," "the moonlight-and-roses," the sudden "bolt-out-of-the-blue." And they feel that when this object is found, the process of love will follow as naturally as a rock falling to the ground. The idea seems to be that humans know how to love instinctively and can do so if the proper circumstances exist. It is against this false concept that Dr. Fromm writes, and I feel he is exactly right. We need to know how to love each other meaningfully. This is not an involuntary reflex; we can want to love and yet do this mistakenly. The desire to love is deeply embedded in man - just like the desire to be musical - but this capacity must be carefully trained and consciously considered before it develops to fruition. There is no more urgent need at this moment than insight into how to love effectively, and it is to this subject and some of its pitfalls that I want to speak tonight. I do not think that Fromm's book is the only resource in this area. I believe that the Gospel of Jesus Christ relates to this need. It not only is a declaration that "God is love"; it is also a demonstration of what love is in our kind of world.

I want us to proceed on this pilgrimage step by step, making sure that we understand where we are and have solid ground under our feet. The first thing to do is to define the nature of love. What is this most familiar and important reality? At least we can say this: love is intense concern for that which is beyond the self. We who use the English language are confronted with a problem here because this one word has so many different connotations. Love can be directed toward a variety of objects - a person, a material object, or an idea. And this love may spring from a multitude of varying motivations. I may love because the object is very desirable - like the sexual love of a man for a woman. I may love out of a sense of responsibility - like my feeling for my son or daughter. I may love out of gratitude and respect - like love for a parent. Or I may even love for no other reason than I am a Christian - the love of Christ may constrain me to have concern for an otherwise unattractive individual. Thus love will vary in nature as it moves toward different objects and is nourished by various motivations, but it is always intense, outgoing concern for something other than ourselves.

Let us move on to the second step now and ask about love's objectives. What does this intense concern seek to accomplish? The answer is: the highest and best for the Beloved. To love you is to want to see your greatest good actualized. Granting your set of capacities and circumstances, I will for you the fulfillment of your highest and will work toward that end. Let me emphasize that this is a "hard-headed" attitude more than a sentimental feeling. We get greatly confused as we read the New Testament command "to love thy neighbor" and "to love our enemy" if we construe this love to be the emotional affection we feel for our child or wife or mother. The love we are to extend to all men is in Frederick Speakman's term "something you do." It is a set of mind toward another, and I can certainly labor to help you fulfill your highest without "liking" everything about you or "feeling rose-eyed" about our relationship.

Love, then, is seeking the highest and best for another, and in our kind of world this implies a certain pattern of action. We did not create the existence in which we find ourselves; it is given to us by Another and structured apart from our will. This means that if you are to achieve your highest, this must be done in relation to moral reality. You cannot act any way you please in this world and still succeed. The boundaries have been set and the pattern has been established, and a concern for another's good will necessarily involve a regard for this context of reality. I cannot help you to achieve your best by suspending the rules or allowing you to have your own way.

In my observation this is one of the most glaring mistakes we make in the act of loving. We are so anxious to make another happy that we fail "to hold the line" in terms of moral reality. We indulge a person in the illusion that his wish is absolute, only to have him crushed later on by "things-as-they-are." I saw this practically illustrated while we were living in Georgia. A couple had been married many years before their only son was born, and they showered him with uncommon affection and attention. The father had been quite an athlete, and he spent a great deal of time playing ball with the boy. The two of them worked out quite a little game of their own. The trouble was that the father let the child make up the rules as they went along. This meant that he always won. He got as many strikes as he pleased and the father always "dropped" a fly so he would be safe. This worked well as long as just the two of them played. But, the day came when the boy was old enough to go play with other boys. He came home in a screaming rage because his contemporaries would not let him be "the rules maker." They played by the mandates of the game, not according to individual whim. And the father's love, which led him to suspend the rules for his son, was actually a great mistake. This does not lead to the highest and best. No matter how intense the concern may be for a person, there must also be a concern for Reality in authentic love.

This leads to the third step of our journey where we ask: "How does love operate in achieving its goal?" Here is intense concern that wants to realize the best for another in our world of structured Reality. What methods does love employ? The crucial answer is: love persuades, love stands beside, love sets the example, love teaches, love sacrifices, love goes to all extremes with no thought of itself, but love does not force. If it is part of love's very nature to seek the highest, it is also love's nature to grant freedom to the beloved. Dietrich Bonhoeffer says that "love does not act directly on another." It moves by indirection, bringing pressure to bear while at the same time recognizing the personhood of the other and refusing to coerce.

I believe this is the hardest task love is ever asked to perform. When you really care for another and know what they should be and do, there is an overwhelming urge to lay hold of them forcibly and say: "You must do this!" Such impulses spring from the purest of motives and the height of real concern. But what we have to realize is that love demands freedom for the other person. No truth can be vital until it is personally appropriated, and this obvious fact about humanity should restrain love from becoming domineering. It sounds like a contradiction of meaning, but there can be "a tyranny of love," where we love so intensely that we violate the personality of the beloved.

The story is told about the influential educator, John Dewey, who was out one winter day taking a walk with his little son. The boy had found a puddle of water on the sidewalk and was splashing it on his clothes. A friend came by and said: "John, that boy ought not to be doing that!" The father answered: "I know it. But I am trying to figure out how to make him know it." Some may scoff at the indirection of such a progressive approach, but there is a kernel of truth here: love does not do something to a person as much as it seeks to get him to act on his own volition.

This freedom, which is the corollary of authentic love, is seen over and over again in the Biblical narrative. The text for tonight's sermon was the greatly beloved parable of the prodigal son. Traditionally we have focused attention on the father's love at the end of the story. I would have you see it manifesting itself at the beginning. How deep the hurt must have been when the son came and asked for his inheritance! This was in effect saying: "Father, I wish you were dead. I repudiate all that home stands for. I want to leave and forget that all this even exists." The personal pain was compounded by the obvious foolishness of the boy. The father must have realized that he did not know what he was talking about and was headed into a tragic plight. It would have been so easy to have tried "to beat some sense into that empty head." But this father really understood what it meant to love. He recognized that this brash young firebrand had to learn for himself what he refused to be taught. So he gave him the inheritance and let him go. A hopeful sequel to this action is that the boy later came back a wiser, more humble man. I expect he would have left home anyway, father's permission or no. He came back, quite probably, because true love had been in action, and had really "never let him go." Here is a good example of the freedom love requires.

We encounter this same reality in Jesus' relation to Judas Iscariot. I preached a sermon once exploring the mystery of the betrayer. Certainly he must have had great potential, and how Jesus must have worked with this one. Yet Judas had a stubborn will of his own. He was probably a Zealot, a Jewish nationalist, who wanted to participate in a revolution and drive out Rome. I imagine Jesus argued with him by the hour, as to the superiority of a spiritual kingdom rather than one of the sword. But He did not act directly. Even that last night, in the upper room, when Judas' nervousness must have belied his guilt, Jesus did not coerce him. He did not block the door as he started out for that fateful rendezvous, or bodily detain him, or shout: "You cannot leave, Judas." No, Jesus knew what it meant to love, and He granted the freedom love requires even to His betrayer.

But is not all that we have said ultimately rooted in the example of God as revealed in the Bible? For some mysterious reason, He made men free. He took common clay and limited His power so that we might conceivably oppose Him. Why did He do this? We cannot know except He must have wanted persons - free sons - loving companions, and this was possible only at the risk of freedom. You can control a puppet

so it will never thwart you, but then a puppet can never love you. This is as close as we can get to the mystery: God is love, and love by its nature grants freedom, even if it means its own defeat.

This truth is not a quick or casual conclusion for me. You see, for two years I struggled with these issues day by day as I wrote my doctoral thesis. It was on the problem of Hell, and as I read thousands of pages I became convinced that here is the grand proof of love. To me the existence of Hell is not a monument to God's wrath; to the contrary, it is a testimony to His love. Why? It underlines the fact that God will not force any man into His kingdom. He grants eternal asylum to those who refuse to respond. As C.S. Lewis puts it so well: "In the End there will be just two kinds of persons - those who say to God: 'Thy will be done,' and those to whom God says: 'Thy will be done.'" Down through all eternity will stand this freedom, because God is love and love requires it.

So you see, love is not an involuntary process like falling down steps. It can be mistakenly and erroneously practiced. Ponder carefully what it is: intense concern for another. Consider seriously what it seeks: the highest and best in a world of moral reality. And then remember how it works: not directly, but in the freedom it inherently grants.