

Come and See How They Love One Another

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Come and see. Come And See! These are the words of someone who has found and is excited to share.

Referring to the pagan Romans' view of the early Church, Tertullian wrote "It is mainly the deeds of a love so noble that lead many to put a brand upon us. See how they love one another, they say."

If our meetings and churches, yearly meetings, and international organizations are communities rooted in deeds of love we, like Phillip excitedly inviting Nathaniel to come and see Jesus for himself, will be able to invite others to come and see. And they will exclaim about us "See how they love one another."

The early Church was persecuted, in part, because the Romans believed it undermined the social order by not participating in the state religion. Moreover, they believed the Church also threatened the gods' favor by not worshipping their idols. But the Church was also known by the ways it carried out Jesus' commandment and prophecy: "I give you a new commandment: love one another as I have loved you... . If there is this love among you, then everyone will know you are my disciples" (John 13:34-35, REB). Tertullian confirmed the truth of this when he wrote that Romans exclaimed about Christians "See how they love one another."

"As I have loved you... love one another." How did Jesus love? His love is demonstrated throughout the Gospels. And it was not limited to his disciples and followers. Jesus' love was active, and often unexpected. He did not show love to his nation by raising an army and forcing an end to the Roman occupation of Israel, though this is what was anticipated and expected of the Messiah. Instead, Jesus' love was made manifest in welcoming, teaching, healing, and feeding. Acts of kindness and love toward individual people were the hallmark of Jesus' life. Not the people one would expect, not the rich, or powerful, or the religious authorities of his day, but those who were humble, and those society would look down on.

Some of my favorite passages that describe Jesus' acts of love are Matthew chapters 8 & 9, following the Sermon on the Mount. First he heals a leper. Next he heals the servant of a Roman Centurion. He then heals Peter's mother-in-law. And "That evening they brought to him many who were possessed by demons; and he drove the spirits out with a word and healed all who were sick" (Matt 8:16 REB).

Jesus goes on to cast out demons from two possessed men, have a paralyzed man walk, call Matthew the tax-collector to be a disciple, heal the bleeding woman by her touch of his cloak, raise to life a young girl thought to be dead, cure two men of blindness, and give a dumb man speech. He "went round all the towns and villages teaching in their synagogues, proclaiming the good news of the kingdom, and curing every kind of illness and infirmity" (Matt 9:35 REB).

Another testimony to Jesus' love is the story of the woman caught committing adultery. Instead of joining the self-righteous crowd in condemning her, he says to them: "Let whichever of you is free from sin throw the first stone at her." After everyone leaves without punishing her, Jesus says: "Has no one condemned you? ... Neither do I condemn you (John 8:10-11)."

Jesus' love was shown in deeds of kindness and mercy. They were acts of kindness and mercy toward those people his society and culture would hold in contempt, or at best dismiss as unworthy. He touched people who were unclean, the leper and the bleeding woman, even though he would be rendered ritually unclean himself. He showed mercy to an officer of the occupying army terrorizing his county (the Centurion) and welcomed a traitor as a disciple (Matthew the tax-collector). He healed men who were possessed – outcasts who today we might think of as mentally ill.

Just as the people who interacted with Jesus knew God's love through his actions, so today we know God's love in the ways we are actively loved by others and the ways we actively love. Miracles are not necessary.

When I was about 5 years old, I realized I was different from others. At the time I could not give a name to, or truly understand, this difference. Although I never thought there was anything wrong with me, from that time on I was not confident in the love of my family, or friends, or God. This difference must remain my secret. As I became a young adult, I began to understand the way in which I was different. And I was sure I would be condemned by society, my friends would abandon me, and my family would not love me if anyone knew my secret. And I feared that God did not love me, but actually hated me.

The writer of Lamentations described my fear and how I felt unloved:

"I am one who has seen affliction under the rod of God's wrath; he has driven and brought me into darkness without any light; against me alone he turns his hand, again and again, all day long.

"... He has walled me about so that I cannot escape; he has put heavy chains on me; though I call and cry for help, he shuts out my prayer; he has blocked my ways with hewn stones, he has made my paths crooked.

"He is a bear lying in wait for me, a lion in hiding; he led me off my way and tore me to pieces; he has made me desolate; he bent his bow and set me as a mark for his arrow.

"He shot into my vitals the arrows of his quiver; I have become the laughingstock of all my people, the object of their taunts all day long. ... [M]y soul is bereft of peace; I have forgotten what happiness is" (excerpts from Lamentations 3:1-18 NRSV).

It easy to say "I love you." And even easier to say "God loves you." But it is not always easy to show love; to be active in our love toward one another. It is not always easy to be a loving presence that does not condemn but encourages. Not always easy to show the love that Jesus commends to us: "Love your enemies and pray for your persecutors; only so can you be children of your heavenly Father, who causes the sun to rise on good and bad alike, and sends the rain on the innocent and the wicked" (Matthew 5:44 - 45).

30 years ago I was searching for a spiritual community where I could belong. At the age of 29 I ventured into a Friends Meeting for the first time.

I found love among Friends. Come and see.

The ways that Friends have loved me have not been miraculous. But they have been noble deeds of love, kindness, and generosity. The everyday love of everyday situations. Friends helped my soul to heal. Not the dramatic healing that Jesus often brought, but just as wonderful. Friends have shown me the love of God through the hands of humans.

The first time I worshipped with Friends was a revelation to me. Sitting silently in the presence of God was a soothing balm to my soul. After that first worship, I joined Friends for refreshments. A woman announced that everyone was welcome at her home that afternoon for fellowship. Then this woman, who I had never before met, made a point of coming to me and inviting me. She did not know me. She did not know if I was good or evil, innocent or wicked. She did not concern herself with anything other than offering me hospitality. She was a child of our “heavenly Father, who causes the sun to rise on good and bad alike, and sends the rain on the innocent and the wicked.” This simple kindness showed me God’s love and helped heal my soul.

There are many, many, such simple examples of Friends showing me love.

As a gay man I had some fear and trepidation about being in a religious community. Being gay was the secret difference that haunted my childhood and made me uncertain of being loved. So, in the Friends Meeting: Would I be accepted, or would I be driven out? Would I be loved, or merely tolerated? I was, by this time, confident in my life. But not confident in how I was perceived and accepted by society. And I was still unsure of God’s love.

I knew that not everyone at meeting thought my life was right or good. But they accepted me as I was, and trusted that I would be taught and led by Christ, the Inward Teacher. I found a spiritual community in which I was loved. My gifts were accepted. My growth in the Light was encouraged. Friends helped heal my soul with simple, small acts of love.

The Meeting was the living embodiment of chapter 14 of Paul’s letter to the Romans.

“Accept anyone who is weak in faith without debate about his misgivings. ... Who are you to pass judgement on someone else’s servant? Whether he stands or falls is his own Master’s business; and stand he will, because his Master has power to enable him to stand.

“... You, then, why do you pass judgement on your fellow-Christian? And you, why do you look down on your fellow-Christian? We shall all stand before God’s tribunal... So, you see, each of us will be answerable to God.

“Let us therefore cease judging one another, but rather make up our minds to place no obstacle or stumbling block in a fellow-Christian’s way. All that I know of the Lord Jesus convinces me that nothing is impure in itself; only, if anyone considers something impure, then for him it is impure. ...[F]or the kingdom of God is ... justice, peace, and joy, inspired by the Holy Spirit. Everyone who shows himself a servant of Christ in this way is acceptable to God and approved by men.

“Let us, then, pursue the things that make for peace and build up the common life. ... If you have some firm conviction, keep it between yourself and God.

“In a word, accept one another as Christ accepted us, to the glory of God” (excerpts from Romans 14:1 - 15:7).

This kind of love offers healing and promise. Even the writer of Lamentations, after the description of despair I quoted a few minutes ago, continues with these words of hope: “The

Lord's love is surely not exhausted, nor has his compassion failed; they are new every morning, so great is his constancy" (Lamentations 3:22-23).

The love that Friends have shown me over the past 30 years makes clear to me: "The Lord's love is surely not exhausted, nor has his compassion failed; they are new every morning."

George Fox, knowing the human tendency toward judgement, wrote to Friends: "...[D]o not strive about outward things; but dwell in the love of God, for that will unite you together, and make you kind and gentle one towards another; and to seek one another's good and welfare, and to be helpful one to another; and see that nothing be lacking among you, then all will be well. And let temperance and patience and kindness and brotherly love be exercised among you, so that you may abound in virtue, and the true humility; living in peace, showing forth the nature of Christianity, that you all may live as a family" (George Fox, 1676).

Isaac Pennington wrote what I believe is one of the best descriptions of our life together when we are living the love of God:

"Our life is love, and peace, and tenderness; and bearing one with another, and forgiving one another, and not laying accusations one against another; but praying one for another, and helping one another up with a tender hand" (Isaac Pennington, 1667).

When noble deeds of love are the truth of our life together, we can invite others with confidence and enthusiasm, saying: "Come And See!" And they will exclaim about us: "See how they love one another!"

First Scripture Reading: Romans 12:1-21, 13:8-10

Read before the message was presented.

Therefore, my friends, I implore you by God's mercy to offer your very selves to him: a living sacrifice, dedicated and fit for his acceptance, the worship offered by mind and heart. Conform no longer to the pattern of this present world, but be transformed by the renewal of your minds. Then you will be able to discern the will of God, and to know what is good, acceptable, and perfect.

By authority of the grace God has given me I say to everyone among you: do not think too highly of yourself, but form a sober estimate based on the measure of faith that God has dealt to each of you. For just as in a single human body there are many limbs and organs, all with different functions, so we who are united with Christ, though many, form one body, and belong to one another as its limbs and organs.

Let us use the different gifts allotted to each of us by God's grace: the gift of inspired utterance, for example, let us use in proportion to our faith; the gift of administration to administer, the gift of teaching to teach, the gift of counselling to counsel. If you give to charity, give without grudging; if you are a leader, lead with enthusiasm; if you help others in distress, do it cheerfully.

Love in all sincerity, loathing evil and holding fast to the good. Let love of the Christian community show itself in mutual affection. Esteem others more highly than yourself.

With unflagging zeal, aglow with the Spirit, serve the Lord. Let hope keep you joyful; in trouble stand firm; persist in prayer; contribute to the needs of God's people, and practice hospitality. Call down blessings on your persecutors - blessings, not curses. Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep. Live in agreement with one another. Do not be proud, but be ready to mix with humble people. Do not keep thinking how wise you are.

Never pay back evil for evil. Let your aims be such as all count honorable. If possible, so far as it lies with you, live at peace with all. My dear friends, do not seek revenge, but leave a place for divine retribution; for there is a text which reads, 'Vengeance is mine, says the Lord, I will repay.' But there is another text: 'If your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him a drink; by doing this you will heap live coals on his head.' Do not let evil conquer you, but use good to conquer evil. (Romans 12:1-21 REB)

Leave no debt outstanding, but remember the debt of love you owe one another. He who loves his neighbor has met every requirement of the law. The commandments, 'You shall not commit adultery, you shall not commit murder, you shall not steal, you shall not covet,' and any other commandment there may be, are all summed up in the one rule, 'Love your neighbor as yourself.' Love cannot wrong a neighbor; therefore love is the fulfilment of the law. (Romans 13:8-10 REB)

Second Scripture Reading: Philippians 2:1-4 & Colossians 3:12-17

Read after open worship

If then our common life in Christ yields anything to stir the heart, any consolation of love, any participation in the Spirit, any warmth of affection or compassion, fill up my cup of happiness by thinking and feeling alike, with the same love for one another and a common attitude of mind. Leave no room for selfish ambition and vanity, but humbly reckon others better than yourselves. Look to each other's interests and not merely to your own. (Philippians 2:1-4)

Put on, then, garments that suit God's chosen and beloved people: compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, patience. Be tolerant with one another and forgiving, if any of you has cause for complaint: you must forgive as the Lord forgave you. Finally, to bind everything together and complete the whole, there must be love. Let Christ's peace be arbiter in your decisions, the peace to which you were called as members of a single body. Always be thankful. Let the gospel of Christ dwell among you in all its richness; teach and instruct one another with all the wisdom it gives you. With psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, sing from the heart in gratitude to God. Let every word and action, everything you do, be in the name of the Lord Jesus, and give thanks through him to God the Father. (Colossians 3:12-17)