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**“The Crisis of Love”
A sermon by Mark E. Diehl**

**25th Sunday in Ordinary Time (Year C)
September 22, 2013
John 3:14-21; Ephesians 2:1-10**

For many, love is the easy antidote for whatever ails you. It is a wonderful sentiment and dominates the message of the greeting card industry for Valentine’s Day, weddings, Mother’s Day, and anniversaries.

Love also carries a darker side as well. In the belief that love conquers all, it can be employed to bring the object of one’s love into submission. That sets people up for conflict and disappointment, and if prolonged can destroy a relationship.

One of the first weddings I performed as a freshly minted and ordained, and very green minister was for a neighbor. The gentleman was in his eighties and had been a widower for several years. He met a lovely woman his same age who had also been widowed for a few years. She was winsome and personable – one of those bubbly personalities. The man, on the other hand, could be a bit cantankerous. I think I’m being generous in saying that. Anyway, I was surprised when they came over to ask if I would do a wedding service in his home. To me, they didn’t seem like a match.

But what did I know? I was in my mid-twenties and they were in their eighties. Could I provide any counseling to them that might be at all relevant to their situation? So I married them.

She remained her cheerful self, and he seemed happier. Within six months, however, his cantankerous side reappeared as strong as ever. A few years later, the

disheartened woman confided in me: “He has worn me down. I believed that love conquers all and I thought I could change him by loving him. It hasn’t happened.” It was so sad.

A colleague tells another story. Janice’s husband had died about a year earlier after a marriage of 36 years. One day she asked her minister if, when she died, she would be married to her husband in heaven. Before answering, the minister questioned, “Janice, why do you ask?” And she responded, “Well, I put up with George for most of my life on earth, and I can’t bear the thought of having to live eternally with him in heaven.”

To say the least, love can be challenging.

“God so loved the world that God gave.” God’s love of the world in the giving of Jesus Christ created a crisis, according to our Gospel text. And it continues to create a crisis. Love brings risk and reward. Failure is a possibility as well as is remarkable success.

To love is to create a crisis. Did you know that? Every time you turn on a light, you create shadows. Saying “yes” to one thing may mean saying “no” to something else.

Can you imagine that loving another may generate hatred and opposition? Yet it does. Jesus preached love and they crucified him.

When slaves are freed, it is good news for the slaves, but it brings economic ruin to the slave holders. And what appears to be good news for the former slaves now brings with it responsibility and initiative that their previous existence did not prepare them for. The New Testament records in Acts that riots took place in some areas where the Gospel was preached because it negatively impacted the economic interests of certain merchants. Business declined for those who made and sold idols in the polytheistic Roman world.

The Gospel is preached in church: a young person with plans to enter medical school changes her mind to work with the children of migrant workers on the

Texas border. Parents are upset. The preacher responds, “I was just preaching; I didn’t mean anything by it...”

The remarkable affirmation in this passage of God’s great love for the world generates crisis. The next several verses is a reflection on judgment and condemnation. I thought that is exactly what the love of God in Jesus Christ was to prevent! These verses appear confusing and contradictory. And for years, I thought I just didn’t have the technical understanding of the original language and theology to parse out a comprehensible meaning for this passage.

Being more mature now, at least in number of years lived if not in wisdom, I have made little progress in teasing out the meaning of these ensuing verses. At present, what I am concluding is that verses 18-21 reflect the crisis which love can generate.

Many scholars and preachers make this a crisis for those reading or hearing this proclamation: you need to believe in Jesus or be lost. However that does not accord with the remarkable affirmation that in sending the Son into the world, God did not intend to condemn the world but to save it.

One of the goals of Evangelical Christians in the latter part of the twentieth century was to present the Good News of Jesus Christ to everyone in the world so that each person would have opportunity to believe or to reject Jesus. The advent of radio and television, as well as the mobility of modern society, made this plausible. If the church could do that, so this thinking went, Christians would have successfully discharged their responsibility. It was a grand, if naïve, scheme.

In a very thoughtful book titled *Love Wins*, the author Rob Bell suggests that people reject a variety of Jesuses which Christians and the church present to them.

For instance, one person invited a friend to come to her church. The friend asked if it was a Christian church.

Yes, it is, she told him.

He then explained that he could not come because Christians in his village in Eastern Europe rounded up Muslims, herded them into a building, and killed them all. As a Muslim, he had no interest in going to a Christian Church.

Is that the Jesus the New Testament presents?

In Topeka, Kansas, members of the Westboro Baptist Church travel to events all around the nation carrying signs that read “God hates gays and Jews.” At funerals for American soldiers killed in combat in Iraq and Afghanistan, they will picket with signs that say “Thank God for Dead Soldiers.”

Is that the Jesus the New Testament presents?

Some people only know about Christians from what they see on television and assume Jesus is anti-science, anti-arts, narrow-minded, and judgmental.

Is that the Jesus the New Testament presents?

Rob Bell makes the point that those who reject the church and the Christian faith in such presentations may be exhibiting “a sign of spiritual health.” He says that such people refuse to accept “the very sorts of things that Jesus would refuse to accept.” [p. 8] Bell writes, “Often times when I meet atheists and we talk about the god they don’t believe in, we quickly discover that I don’t believe in that god either.” [p.9]

Some Jesuses ought to be rejected.

We may dismiss these examples as extreme cases antithetical to the Gospel. Yet subtle forms of exclusion and narrowness remain in every group of Christians.

Perhaps the crisis of love is not a crisis for run-of-the-mill human beings, for non-Christians at all. It isn’t a crisis of choosing Jesus or not choosing Jesus.

Could it be that the crisis is for God’s people and for those who love and trust this God? If that is true, then perhaps it is a crisis of how to love, of the quality of love, of love’s persistence and long suffering.

The message of both Old and New Testaments is this: God loves. And God loves. And God loves. The object of God's love is God's creation: the world and all the beings that populate it.

For some reason, God took a special interest in human beings, of every locale and custom, of every race and culture. And God's love is displayed to them, to us, to you and me, whether we are faithful or disobedient, through triumph and tragedy. God loves and loves and loves yet more.

And for those who would follow this God, who would pattern themselves after the One whom this God sent as the embodiment of love – the danger and opportunity for them, for us, is to risk loving in the same fashion.

For those in the community of faith, the first crisis of love may be accepting its reality for us personally. Do you embrace the reality that God really loves you? That God loves the person you know intimately as yourself: all our pettiness and small-mindedness, our short attention spans, our misplaced loyalties, our ingratitude? It is perhaps the greatest challenge for us all.

Now I may have great doubts about God loving that person over there because of their politics and their actions. Yet I know all too well what is inside myself. Do you and I believe that Good News of God's love for us?

The Bible says, "Love your neighbor as yourself." I believe we do exactly that. All the time. Often we cannot believe we can be loved. And that same attitude of self-condemnation spreads to our neighbors around us. We love them just as much as we love ourselves, and that is not very much.

"God so loved the world that God gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life. Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him" (John 3:16-17).

The crisis of love has more to do with the community of faith, with those who

claim to be Christian, than with the reception of the world.

When we acknowledge the reality of God's love for ourselves, something remarkable happens. Our need to blame others, to project upon them our own inadequacies and failures, can lose its grip on us. Love can permeate all our relationships. The circle of love can grow wider as we see the remarkable embrace of the entire world by God's work in Jesus Christ.

Gene Nichol, UNC professor of Law and Director of the Center on Poverty, Work and Opportunity, spoke last week to a group of us gathered in Durham. He made three claims about our country: 1) we are the richest nation in the world; 2) we have the highest levels of poverty – especially child poverty – of any modern nation in the world; and 3) we claim to be the fairest, most equality-based nation in the world. Gene Nichol reflected on how the U.S. can be both the richest and the poorest nation while bragging to others about our commitment to equality. The cognitive dissonance of holding these three facts together cannot be maintained for long.

So how do we, as a society, escape being confronted by this cognitive dissonance? Nichol suggests that it is because our society makes poverty invisible. We do not know, and we do not wish to know, how pervasive and deep the human misery of poverty is. And we do not wish to know how close it is. Yet the reality is that 25% of people in Durham live in extreme poverty.

I believe the church can engage in radical, revolutionary change by doing something very simple.

We must be willing to see. For the circle of love to be extended by the church, especially to the poor, we must see them.

We have to keep our eyes open and not turn away our gaze from that which may break our hearts and sicken our stomachs and call into question our lifestyle choices that reinforce inequities in our society. Perhaps the bravest thing people of faith can do is to look and see and not turn away.

As the nations of Europe moved inexorably toward World War II, W.H. Auden penned these lines:

In the nightmare of the dark
All the dogs of Europe bark,
And the living nations wait,
Each sequestered in its hate;

Intellectual disgrace
Stares from every human face,
And the seas of pity lie
Locked and frozen in each eye.
[from *In Memory of W.B. Yeats*]

Auden named isolation and blame as factors that lead us to dehumanize one another. No wonder Europe was at the brink of war.

And if we will not see, we too shall be at war among ourselves.

For the church, it is always a crisis of love: its quality, its persistence, and its breadth.

Such love is not immediately obvious; it may, in fact, be counterintuitive. An eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth. Isn't that the way to operate? And what we end up with is a blind and toothless world.

Yet some have rightly grasped our human predicament. Martin Luther King, Jr. said, "Darkness cannot drive out darkness: only light can do that. Hate cannot drive out hate: only love can do that."

God so loved the world that God gave and gave and gave. We are called to such a way of being.

Edwin Markham wrote a simple verse about love.

“He drew a circle that shut me out
Heretic, rebel, a thing to flout.
But love and I had the wit to win:
We drew a circle and took him in!”

God so loved the world. Can we in the church draw a circle as big as the one God has drawn and include everyone?