

“A Poverty of Love”
Genesis 4:1-9/1 John 3:11-18

Last April, a Broadway revival began of the musical “My Fair Lady.” That iconic show first appeared on stage more than sixty years ago and tells of a woman named Eliza Doolittle who undergoes a transformation through the efforts of Henry Higgins. Higgins is a professor of phonetics who wagers a friend that in six months’ time he can successfully change Eliza, a Cockney-accented, flower-selling girl, into a Kings-English-speaking, refined woman. He is successful, too, but along the way struggles to see her as something more than his project.

At one point in the play, Eliza storms out of Higgins’ house and encounters her persistent admirer, a young man named Freddy. Earlier, he had sung privately of the joy felt in being “On the Street Where You Live,” but now Freddy tells Eliza directly that he has been writing “sheets and sheets” of words proclaiming his devotion. In response, Eliza declares, in song, that she needs something more. “Don’t talk of stars, burning above, if you’re in love show me! Tell me no dreams filled with desire. If you’re on fire, show me! Here we are together in the middle of the night! Don’t talk of spring! Just hold me tight! Anyone who’s ever been in love’ll tell you that this is no time for a chat!” (Alan Jay Lerner and Frederick Lowe, “My Fair Lady,” 1956)

In those quaint lyrics, Eliza speaks a timeless truth, as beautiful words do ring false unless matched by action. The best evidence of love are not vows made before a preacher, but deeds in the years that follow. The real test of devotion is not a spoken promise between friends, but the moment one drops all plans to be with the other in a time of need. The demonstration of commitment to employees is not a company slogan, but an environment which models flexibility and care. We might not phrase it as did Eliza Doolittle, but know what she meant, as in response to many words, we, too, can say “show me.” A first-century believer named John would agree.

During the month of February, we are focusing here on the theme of poverty. We began last Sunday by speaking of it in the way we typically think first of the subject; namely as it applies to economic challenges. That morning sparked all kinds of conversations and we want them to continue throughout the month, resulting in specific actions both on the individual and congregational level. Still, as the planning for this emphasis began months ago, our team at DPC intentionally chose to broaden the concept of poverty to include other ways that human beings can experience a significant shortfall in their lives. Today, we focus on a poverty of love.

Our reading from Genesis provides a clear and extreme example of such a condition as it tells of the first murder in the Bible. It occurs within the first family and between the first siblings. Adam and Eve have become parents of two sons, Cain and Abel. They discover what all parents of multiple children have discovered ever since; namely that the same genetic make-up can still result in very different personalities. In their case, Abel was drawn to the care of sheep while his brother preferred to till the earth. One day, the two sons bring the very first offering to God with Cain giving some kind of fruit and Abel providing an animal. In a divine response that has evoked confusion and discussion ever since, God accepts Abel’s gift, but not Cain’s. The older son is angry and God intervenes, saying “If you do well, will you not be accepted?” The words do not help as Cain takes his brother out into the field and kills him. Later, God asks “Where is your brother Abel?” The first son replies “I do not know; am I my brother’s keeper?”

Those troubling events provide the backdrop to our New Testament reading, too. “For this is the message you have heard from the beginning,” John writes “that we should love one another. We must not be like Cain who was from the evil one and murdered his brother. And why did he murder him? Because his own deeds were evil and his brother’s righteous.” His

implication is that jealousy caused the homicide and that might be true, but the epistle writer then uses that example for a different point. “We know that we have passed from death to life,” John adds, “because we love one another. Whoever does not love abides in death.” He is naming a poverty of love, but uses it to make another point speaking of Jesus’ death as the supreme example of love before declaring “we ought to lay down our lives for one another.” Perhaps because he realizes that such a gift by definition can only happen once John makes yet another turn in saying “How does God’s love abide in anyone who has the world’s goods and sees a brother or sister in need and yet refuses help?” Thus, over the span of a few sentences, the writer has started with murder and tied it to miserliness before concluding “Little children, let us love, not in word or speech, but in truth and action.” In other words John says “show me.”

While we might feel it a stretch to connect homicide to acts of compassion, many of us can tell about times acts of caring did something to our heart. A member emailed me last week and spoke of the impact from our ministry to homeless neighbors. “Before getting involved in Code Blue,” he wrote “my only experience with the homeless was running the gauntlet of [those seeking assistance] between the train station and my office in Center City and being hounded for two blocks by a particularly aggressive panhandler in San Francisco. My Code Blue experience has opened my eyes, and my heart to their condition and needs.” I know that man well and while he did not suffer from a poverty of love before sharing his gifts in that ministry, it clearly has had a significant impact on his life. So the question is how might we experience the same?

One of my favorite writers is John Ortberg and years ago, he told of a man named Larry. He “was part of a ministry for twentysomethings that my wife used to lead at [a former church],” Ortberg says. “Larry and I had gone to the same college. When he was in his thirties he quit his job so that he could serve full-time at the church (for no pay). He never married, never owned a home, never went on an expensive vacation. He just befriended people... He invited people into groups, into opportunities to make friends and contribute. He saw potential in discouraged people. He had a radar for lonely people. He told people what he thought they could become. Not long after [my wife] had taken over the ministry, Larry, while at a leadership retreat in Milwaukee, was jogging downtown early in the morning and [accidentally] stepped in front of a bus... His loss was devastating to that group of leaders, but even they had no idea of his impact.

“A wake was held for Larry in the chapel of the church... No one was sure how many people would come: after all, Larry never married and had no children and no regular job. Cars came flooding in. The wake lasted three hours. So many came to file past the casket that the line went out the chapel door for blocks; eight hundred people stood in line for three hours to honor him. The next day was the funeral service. The chapel can hold around five hundred people when jammed full. Over the decade or so that we served there, many funerals were held in the chapel, several of them for people of significant stature and achievement. Only one drew so many people that it overflowed the chapel and had to be moved to the main auditorium: Larry Clarke’s.

“At the service and the wake, at the reception and in the halls, one person after another spoke of how his or her life had been touched by Larry. None of the stories were about Larry’s possessions or achievements. All of them were about Larry’s capacity to love. We used to wonder how Larry could afford to give all his time away. Somebody at his funeral mentioned they heard Larry say one time that you’d be surprised how much good food you could find foraging behind Ralph’s Supermarket that gets thrown out even though it is still packaged and fresh. (Ortberg, John. *When the Game is Over it All Goes Back in the Box*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2007, pp. 93-95)

What an amazing example of love, yet we might fairly conclude that Larry's response is as extreme in one direction as Cain's was in the other. Few of us are ready to leave being gainful employment to volunteer full-time at the church. That's true of this pastor as well! Yet there are things that all of us can do; small steps we can take that display an abundance of love.

Four years ago, I read a devotion that opened in this way: "Mason Wartman always has a line of customers out of the door of Rosa's, his pizza shop in Philly. It might not be the best pizza in town, but it's the kindest. Colorful post-its flutter on the walls of the shop like Tibetan prayer flags. Each one is a love-note to the future; a voucher for one free slice of pizza, bought by a paying customer who knows that the next person in the door might be broke."

Intrigued, I did some research and found that Wartman at the age of 27 left a career on Wall Street and using his own money turned a former health food store into a pizzeria. He wanted it to be a place that sold a lot of \$1 pizza slices and gave away a lot of them, too. One of his first customers asked if he could buy a slice for someone else and leave a message with a sticky note placed on the bulletin board. The idea caught on and soon many others were doing the same, writing words of encouragement and posting it for persons who were down on their luck. Individuals who could not afford a slice could walk-in, take one of the notes off the wall and hand it to the cashier. Since March 2014, Rosa's has donated more than 100,000 slices to persons in need at its 11th Street location. Last January, he opened a second shop in West Philadelphia this time using grants from government and non-profit groups.

In speaking about it, Wartman modestly said "Compared to Wall Street this job is a lot more work, but definitely more rewarding." Others are less reserved in their praise. Brian Engelland, a marketing professor at Catholic University uses Wartman's story in his classes. "What Mason is doing to feed the poor and the struggling is a great application of the principle of solidarity," he says. "Each of us has a responsibility to lend a hand to those in need. He's made a way for people to connect with the local community." Patricia Blakely, executive director of the Merchants Fund, which provided a grant to help open the second shop added that the business model "highlights all that is inherently good in [hu]mankind. Given the right opportunity, we are all prepared to help in some small way. It is also really respectful of individual humanity. Nobody has to stand on a street corner and beg for food. You can be just a customer like everyone else with your dignity intact." One of the beneficiaries agreed: "You may not see the individual's face, but it gives you a sense of humanity that people care." (Baskette, Molly "Pay it Forward" *stillspeaking Daily Devotional*, 4/18/15 and Mastrull, Diane "Can Rosa's Fresh Pizza—a hit with Ellen DeGeneres—spark revitalization in Philadelphia's University City?" *philly.com*, 1/31/18)

"Little children," a believer of the past said "let us love, not in word or speech, but in truth and action." Or put more simply, "show me."