

Psalm 98
John 15:1-17

Love

ForeWord

If there is any place where we might expect that love could most confidently be taken to be present, it is surely at a wedding. And yet, we begin today by noting something about the standard Marriage Service which is both surprising and deeply significant.

I hadn't noticed it myself until preparing a particular wedding 15 or so years ago. Wedding preparation includes meeting with the couple a few times before the day to discuss the nature of marriage, what will be done and said on the day, and so on. This often involves tweaking the vows a bit for personal preference, within some set limits.

When I received back from the bride-to-be one of the service drafts I'd sent her, there was something unfamiliar in the suggestions for the vows that I couldn't quite put my finger on. And then I saw it: she had inserted a couple of lines by which the couple would express how much they loved one another, or something to that effect.

Why not? , you might ask. But this was novel at that point in the service, and the penny dropped on what I hadn't seen before: the Marriage Service *doesn't care* whether the people standing at the altar love one another. This is the case in both the broadly catholic "religious" service of the Uniting Church and in the civil service used at the State Registry Office. The only question asked of a couple about their being present on the day is whether they have come willingly, which is not the same thing as "Do you love one another? "

Of course, in a modern liberal society, we expect that, if there is a wedding, there are no shotguns in sight and that the wedding has been convened because of the couple's affection for one another.

But the Marriage Service itself doesn't ask about that. The substantial question put to the couple is not, *Do you love?* but *Will you love?* This is a place for promise-making rather than stating what is presently the case. Affection might still be expressed in any particular service, but it's not prescribed. Whatever is at the heart of the wording of the traditional "religious" and "secular" marriage services, it is not affection.

Perhaps that seems rather a subtle distinction to make, given that, in societies like ours, couples tend to turn up at the altar based on their affection for each other. But it's worth noting here that the Marriage Service could work just as much for a traditional arranged wedding as for a modern "romantic" wedding. It's neither here nor there, so far as the Service itself is concerned, whether the marriage originates in romance or arrangement. What matters is the promise, and therefore the implicit command to love.

This bizarre notion – that we might be commanded to love one another even on that occasion – runs quite counter to our modern sense for what a wedding is about. But my concern today is not wedding vows but the simple strangeness to our ears of a command to love. Perhaps the wedding service is the only place we hear that command today in the secular world, if indeed we *can* hear it against the background noise of self-interpretation, self-love and exclusion of the other, which seems to be growing louder around us.

How can we be commanded to love? We return to this after listening for God's word in a hearing of a passage from the Gospel according to St John.

Word: The Testimony of Scripture

(→ Hearing: John 15. 1-17)

Word: Proclamation

“This is my commandment, that you love one another”.

Clearly, the love at stake here is not the love we *feel*. It is not that kind of love that is our natural resonance with another person. Affectionate love, of course, is central to our being. Romance, family, friendship – these “felt” loves are as essential to us as they are inevitable.

But Jesus claims there is a love which is not natural, which is not innate, which is not an expression merely of what we feel or want. That claim must, therefore, come as a commandment, as something which contradicts what we think is normal or natural.

Yet, there's a world of difference between what we are commanded *not* to do and what we are commanded *to* do. “Do not kill”, “Do not commit adultery” and “Do not lie” require that we recognise the other without requiring any recognition of our connection to that other. A “Do not” commandment is how we keep our distance, and an investment towards not being mistreated in return. “Do not” is generic: Do not kill means do not kill *anyone*.

But the command to love is not generic; it is specific. “Do not”. If we are not to lie to *anyone*, we are to love some *particular* one. The command is not to love “everyone” or “humanity” but some particular person, in front of you. “Love one another”, Jesus says. This is direct and personal: love *that* one *there*.

If this were easy, it wouldn't be commanded. And sometimes we just can't do it, even when everything began so well. There's nothing to be said for getting judgmental here. And the imperative to love can be manipulated to force people to stay unwillingly in life-threatening relationships, which is also misses the point. Such ruptures of what was love show just how hard love is, and how the command to love understands our faltering capacities for love.

Perhaps all this is obvious, or at least familiar. But the question is, can such a commandment be heard today? What is a call to love in the midst of assassinations, inflammatory presidential blustering and gleeful anticipations of death penalties? What is the command to love while occupations continue and racism flaunts on our streets? We cannot help but be sceptical here. Can love really be a serious political option?

It can, but only if the work of politics is reconceived. Politics, particularly in its law-making and -enforcing mode, finds it easy to say what love *doesn't* look like. This is what the “Do not” commandments are for, and a developed society like ours has thousands of them.

The politics of love would be entirely different. “Do not” is open-and-shut easy: he did it, or he didn't.

But the work of love is hard to pin down, harder to identify. It is gift and invitation and response. And we don't really know when it is done. Or how long it lasts. And so the command to love continues to be stated. “Do not steal” speaks to the opportune moment. “Love one another” speaks to the next moment, and the next, and the next.

We know when we've got the "Do not" right or wrong. But love both succeeds and fails at the same time. Even if it's rebuffed, love has been right. And when it's received as right, there is yet more love to be done.

The "Do not" commands are about quantities that can be counted – what has or hasn't been done. The command to love is a quality, a value, a means of being present. "Do not" commands keep us safe for a while – if we have enough of them – like a heavy lid on a pot threatening to boil over. The command to love turns down the heat.

And is this not what we need – a turning down of the heat?

And do we not have a part to play in this?

And so, stop counting the rights and the wrongs, and hear the command: *love one another.*

Love one another. In the home. At the workplace. On the roads. In the shopping centre. In the Parliament. In the Church and the Mosque and the Synagogue. In the council meeting. In the university. On the tram. In the café. In the library. At the concert. In the park. In the queue. Even at the football.

Love. One. Another.

There is no other way out of all this.
