



“Whenever Our Hearts Condemn”

When I was interviewed 12 years ago for the job at Canadian Memorial, one woman put the question to me: “Would you die for this congregation?” I guess she was testing whether or not she could trust me. Was I going to be a flash-in-the-pan hotshot? Was this just a “job”; was it a stepping-stone to something bigger and better? I don’t honestly know what she was getting at, but I do remember my response: “I hardly know you! I’m willing to live for you, I know that much!” I also remember feeling vaguely guilty that I couldn’t unambiguously say, “Absolutely, I’ll die for you people.”

As I was reading 1 John I was surprised by what jumped out at me. It’s a line that’s buried in the middle of the reading. It’s easy to miss because there is so much else going in this reading to sink one’s teeth into. Jesus lays down his life for his friends, and this is to be the measure of our own love. Talk about setting the bar way up there!

If we see a brother or sister in need and have the worldly means to help, but refuse, how can we claim to be followers of Christ? We are encouraged to love in actions, not just in word or speech. This is the only sign that we abide in God’s love – by our fruits. At this point in the reading, the author realizes that he’s set the bar so

high that the reader – you and me – may be sinking into a morass of self-doubt and guilt. We are fast coming to the conclusion that that we are frauds, with no right to claim a Christian identity.

I felt guilty after finishing the reading. Is it just me, or do others have this voice in their head telling you that you are not doing enough for the world – not being Christ-like enough? Let’s just call this voice Guilt. Guilt invariably minimizes what I am actually doing and focuses instead on all that I have left undone. It taunts:

“So, you’ve written a few books, and given 25 years to trying to build spiritual community. That’s nothing compared to some people! Look at so and so. They are serving in Africa and living in poverty among the poorest of the poor. You could be sacrificing more, if you really cared. You have no problem spending money on yourself, but how much are you actually spending on the welfare of others? How about all those people who go to Mexico – swine flu or no – and build poor people houses to live in? Have *you* ever done that?”

Don’t get me wrong. Guilt has a place. Sometimes it’s a healthy emotion. This economic meltdown was caused by a lot of people who

would have benefited from a healthy dose of guilt. I'm not talking about this kind of guilt – a natural signal that helps us know when we're out of line. I'm talking about an over-active Guilt muscle that grinds the average person down with the message that you'll never be enough.

Here's a thing I've learned about Guilt. You can be a martyr, walk over beds of nails, give your body to be burned, take a vow of poverty, give all your worldly possessions away, and do you think that Guilt will leave you alone? Absolutely not. Why not? Because the job description of the kind of Guilt I'm talking about is to make us feel bad. Psychologist Eric Berne taught that inside of us we all have a natural parent and a critical parent. The critical parent is the source of the kind of Guilt I'm talking about. We'll never please this inner parent. The need you see is bottomless. As long as there is an unmet need out there somewhere in the world, there is no escape for the earnest Christian from the critical parent. Often times, we externalize this inner voice and call it "God".

Never mind the swine flu, there is a pandemic of clergy burnout in the United Church of Canada. Disability claims are soaring among clergy. My theory is that the more virtuous, the higher the calling, the more idealistic one is, the more susceptible one is to the wiles of Guilt. It's an occupational hazard. Take the traditional model of pastoral visiting. Let's call it chaplaincy. In this model, one person is charged with the responsibility of taking care of

say 300 families. After all we're ordained to Word, Sacrament, and *Pastoral Care*. Stop for a moment and consider the emotional, psychological, and spiritual needs of your own family, and multiply that by a factor of 300. The more loving and compassionate the pastor is – the more willing she is to "lay down her life" - the more work she generates, because who doesn't want a piece of love in a world where there is a chronic shortage of it? The need is literally bottomless. And the good pastor is acutely aware at all times of what she is *not* doing, the person that she did *not* get to that week, the follow-up phone call that *was not* made. The calls that *were* made, the people she *did* visit, the good work that *was* accomplished are rendered mere trivialities by Guilt. The critical parent is alive and well among my clergy colleagues.

The writer of 1 John continues. By loving like Christ – in action and not just in word or deed – our hearts will be "reassured before God whenever our hearts condemn us" (1 John 3:20). A condemning heart is a more poetic name for Guilt. I'm not absolutely certain that the writer's way out at this point is a great solution. The way I'm reading this line is that if we want to stop our hearts from condemning us, then love more, be more, be better people. But if what I've just said is true, then it's no solution at all – because the condemning heart will never let us off the hook. After a long day of being as kind and helpful as we could muster; after putting another co-worker's needs ahead of ours yet again; after

spending hours trying to see the problem from another person's perspective; after leaving work and going to take care of our aging parent; after all of this, the condemning heart will wake us in the middle of the night with a list of all those things we could have done differently, been more Christ-like. No, I think the answer to the condemning heart comes in the next line:

“...for God is greater than our hearts...”

There is a field of loving awareness, a Presence encompassing and infusing this whole universe, along with our minds and our condemning hearts that we need to rest in. There is a Voice beneath the voice of guilt, a Nurturing Parent whispering: “Sshhhhh... don't do that to yourself. You think that condemning voice is my Voice, but it's not.”

If you want to imagine what the voice of the Nurturing Parent sounds like, think Leonard Cohen! In his song *The Lover*, the lyrics gently point toward the spiritual solution to the condemning heart. He is addressing God.

I said I'd be your lover.
You laughed at what I said.
I lost my job forever.
I was counted with the dead.

Four short lines conveying so much meaning. The ego makes a heroic offer to love God. God laughs. The ego loses its job forever. It's counted with the dead. Our egos are

not the engine of love, and if we pretend they are, we will end up falling short – every time.

I swept the marble chambers,
But you sent me down below.
You kept me from believing
Until you let me know:

That I am not the one who loves –
It's love that seizes me.
When hatred with his package comes,
You forbid delivery.

Hatred will come, starting with self-hatred when we discover that the supply of love that can be generated by the ego is but a drop. And when it dries up, the condemning heart comes on stage to play its role. The ego is not bad. But it can't live up to the standards of divine love. Our small selves have an intuition that this is what life is all about, but the answer is not in trying harder. It's allowing the ego to open into the ocean of love. Cohen discovers that he is not the one who loves. It's love that seizes him. It's in allowing our hearts to be seized by Love, hourly, daily, monthly, year after year that the ego can assume its proper place – of serving the interests of love – not condemning its own shortcomings. The ego – the part of us that believes we are disconnected from Divine Love – loses its job forever. It's sent “below”, to the servant's quarter where it will learn the dignity of humility.

Cohen realizes that God had kept him from believing – by which he means intellectual assent to a bunch of beliefs – until he had this mystical or

firsthand awareness of Love as the all-encompassing field of the universe. God kept the poet from committing to any religion until he had this direct experience that he is not the one who loves, but rather, it's love that seizes him. He is describing here the majority of people in the 21st century who call themselves spiritual but not religious. They are not interested in religion as intellectual sent to a belief system. Yet, they also have not experienced the Love that apprehends. And if the church of the 21st century doesn't have this to offer, we have nothing to offer. Not our love – but the love of the Lover.

When the writer of 1 John goes on, in this reading, to issue a commandment to “believe in the name of Jesus Christ and love one another” we need to appreciate what is meant the word “believe”. It is not intellectual assent. To believe, in the ancient world, was to give one's heart or to open one's heart. To believe in the name of Jesus Christ is to open to the same Love that animated Jesus. This Love is not the voice of Guilt. It's a voice that says, “Abide in me and I will abide in you. Abide in me, and then go about your day. Lead with your heart and your heart will lead you deeper and deeper into Me. Then you will know what it means to love in deed, and not just in words.”