

May the words of my mouth...

I wish I had known about Ashley Brilliant when I was growing up with my three brothers, however, I am glad I know about him now. Cartoonist Ashley Brilliant has a way of summing up interpersonal situations with insight and humour. There is this one cartoon that pictures a man standing at a podium (or maybe it's a pulpit) and he has one hand decisively raised, and he says with great conviction, "The time for action is past! Now is the time for senseless bickering!"

Ya. That rings a bell. Been there. In my family. In community. In heats of moments when logic and patience leaves the room. Treena and I attend a lot of church meetings, and I am pleased to say that at the end of the day over a glass of wine, the times when we recount senseless bickering are not that common, but they do exist. Our families, our communities, our institutions, our work places, they are made of humans living and working together, and that is not always easy. And when the bar is set at love, when what we are trying to embody is love, like real love, not ego stroking, or romance, but real, gritty, committed, self-giving love, all embracing love, that's not easy.

I grew up in a family that was quite close, and frankly, quite well kept in check. My folks managed to create a culture in our family more of action than of senseless bickering. My mom had four boys in less than five years, which boggles my mind and helps me understand the tight organizational systems my folks put in

place, likely out of survival more than anything. Other families, I have noticed, have different cultures, and seem to fly by the seat of their pants a little more than ours did. In every family, these close relationships involve an intense vulnerability from which flows both deep and abiding joy, and possible deep woundedness. Like Piet Hein once wrote: “To live in love with saints above, that will, indeed, be glory. To live below with saints we know, Ah, that’s a different story.”

To live below with saints we know... As we read in the scriptures for this morning, Jesus says, “This is my commandment, that you love...” those saints below in the same way that I have loved, to abide in that love. I for one will try to follow that commandment til my dying breath but I am also aware that, as easy as that rolls off the tongue, it can be a piece of work to live out in life, in family, in the human community. What does that actually mean to abide in love in our families, in our churches, in our work places, with our neighbors, when we face hard challenges, when abuse enters the picture, when alcohol or drugs are involved, when someone dies without our permission, in the highs and lows with our parents, our children, our co-workers. What does it mean to abide in love?

You see, when we take a gospel reading like this one, a much beloved on about love out of the context of the story, it sounds, well, lovely. But truth be told, this is the farewell discourse. This speech is part of a longer teaching that Jesus gives his closest friends before he faces his suffering and death. And he knows that

his own capacity to love through suffering will be put to the test and he may well not get another chance to say what he wants to say. So he spends his time talking about love- not strategy, not program, not ideology- love. Abide in love.

Abide is a funny word that we almost never use anymore, but it is a great word. It literally means to live. To abide in, is to take up residence in- to immerse yourself in. My abiding place is my home, the place I live, my dwelling. So we are told this is a total immersion thing. No one has ever seen God says First John, but when we immerse ourselves in love, God becomes real to us. Isn't that lovely?

Ah well as lovely a teaching as that is, the real litmus test of our faithfulness to that lovely teaching is when it gets hard, when it is tempting to launch a time for bickering, when someone hurts us, when trust is broken, when love is put to the test. And I could go into all the key elements that create our ability to hold on in times like these, elements like communication, commitment, self-understanding, faithfulness, determination, humility, choice, magic, fun... there are so many elements, but the reality is, there is pain involved, and work and risk, and uncertainty. Sometimes it even means leaving, stopping, ending, starting again. Sometimes love is really hard.

We are, sometimes, allowed into the homes and families and struggles of people at some of those hard times, when senseless bickering is a real option: times of loss, times of change, times when life goes in very unexpected ways and when

we or others have done something that hurt. But interestingly, these are times we often struggle through alone, because they reveal our humanness, our weakness, and we can be embarrassed or ashamed. Someone has not measured up to the love to which we aspire and it may well have been us. That is not the time when we are most inclined to call on the one who holds the high bar of love in place.

But I am here to tell you that none of us get over that bar cleanly, and Jesus knew that when he said it. In fact, he didn't even get over it when, in his hardest moment he cried out "my God, why have you forsaken me." But the truth is, those are the very moments when God carries the torch- when we can carry it no longer. When our capacity to love runs out, love remains. When we feel out on a limb and cut off.

Jesus uses the metaphor of the vine and branches. We cannot love God, we cannot abide in God's love if we are not connected, like branches of a vine. And later in the 15<sup>th</sup> chapter of John he goes on to say, "This is my commandment, that you love one another, that your joy may be full." We are connected for the sake of joy but there is a paradox at the centre of the love to which we are called- our joy is most full when we are most connected, most vulnerable, and therefore most susceptible to the pain of it. The joy of it, and the pain of it live very close together. Abiding in love is choosing to immerse ourselves in vulnerability, which opens us to the exquisite and the terrible. Abiding in love is choosing to live in that place

where tears and laughter come easily, readily, wonderfully, and sometimes painfully.

Actually, the real mystery of abiding in love is that given how challenging it can be, that we do it at all- that we persist. But God made us like a vine and branches, made us to be connected. There is an amazing compulsion within the human heart that resists giving up, and I believe that is God. We are hard wired to keep at it, to seek out that abiding place because I believe somewhere in us we know that that is where our soul belongs, and that is where God is found.

You see, the words, “you shall love the Lord your God” become, in the end, less a command than a promise. And the promise is that, yes, on the weary feet of faith and the fragile wings of hope, WE WILL love the Lord our God as from the first God has loved us. I wonder also if Jesus’ command for us to love one another isn’t similarly as much a promise as a commandment. Despite all the evidence to the contrary, WE WILL come to love each other, as from the first Christ loved us. Amen.