

Is There Any Room for Love?

Isaiah 7:10-16

Matthew 1:18-25

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Fourth Sunday of Advent

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By now it is a well know story, having circulated across the internet for years. .

One day, an old professor of the School of Public Management in France, was invited to lecture on the topic of "Efficient Time Management" in front of a group of 15 executive managers representing the largest, most successful companies in America. Standing in front of this group of elite managers, who were willing to write down every word that would come out of the famous professor's mouth, the professor slowly met eyes with each manager, one by one, and finally said, "we are going to conduct an experiment".

From under the table that stood between the professor and the listeners, the professor pulled out a big glass jar and gently placed it in front of him. Next, he pulled out from under the table a bag of stones, each the size of a tennis ball, and placed the stones one by one in the jar. He did so until there was no room to add another stone in the jar. Lifting his gaze to the managers, the professor asked, "Is the jar full?" The managers replied, "Yes".

The professor paused for a moment, and replied, "Really?"

Once again, he reached under the table and pulled out a bag full of pebbles. Carefully, the professor poured the pebbles in and slightly rattled the jar, allowing the pebbles to slip through the larger stones, until they settled at the bottom. Again, the professor lifted his gaze to his audience and asked, "Is the jar full?"

At this point, the managers began to understand his intentions. One replied, "apparently not!"

"Correct", replied the old professor, now pulling out a bag of sand from under the table. Cautiously, the professor poured the sand into the jar. The sand filled up the spaces between the stones and the pebbles.

Yet again, the professor asked, "Is the jar full?"

Without hesitation, the entire group of students replied in unison, "NO!"

"Correct", replied the professor. And as was expected by the students, the professor reached for the pitcher of water that was on the table, and poured water in the jar until it was absolutely full. The professor now lifted his gaze once again and asked, "What great truth can we surmise from this experiment?"

With his thoughts on the lecture topic, one manager quickly replied, "We learn that as full as our schedules may appear, if we only increase our effort, it is always possible to add more meetings and tasks."

“No”, replied the professor. The great truth that we can conclude from this experiment is: If we don’t put all the larger stones in the jar first, we will never be able to fit all of them later.¹

It is probably apocryphal, but still true!

As we have celebrated Advent this year we have been struggling with that very question though, haven’t we? How do we fit all this stuff into our lives—lives that are already so crowded and full? Crowded and full with a lot of things that, if we are honest, are not really healthy, good, Christian. But there they are!

But it doesn’t stop there! As we have seen, there are so many items which we want to add to our lives, but wonder where we would put them. Where do we have room for hope amid the piles of cynicism that we build up to protect us from our disillusioned idealism? How do we squeeze peace into a world that seems intent on arming itself to the teeth? Is there any room for a joy when we are so gorged with happy?

And how in the world, as much as we want it, do we fit love into the mix?

Love. It is so essential; it is so sought after. We disguise our need in so many ways. At times our need for love is confused with sex, with consumption, with facade. We believe that if we have someone, something, that that great gaping hole in our life will be filled.

But it isn’t. And so we just keep piling our lives deeper and higher with artificial love, just enough of a vaccine to keep us from experiencing the real thing. Maybe if we just feel a bit of romance, a bit of nostalgia, a hint of compassion that will suffice.

But it doesn’t. We know that! We so want to experience love, yet there is so little room. What are we willing to clear out in order to experience real love?

Are we willing to remove the legalism, those over bearing rules that often rule our lives? Joseph knew what he was supposed to do. The law was very clear. Many times sitting in the synagogue he had heard his rabbi read the text from the law. Time and time again he would intone; *“Verily, verily, the Lord is clear. As he spoke to Moses, as we read in Deuteronomy 22:23-24—‘If there is a young woman, a virgin already engaged to be married, and a man meets her in the town and lies with her, you shall bring both of them to the gate of the town and stone them to death, the young woman because she did not cry for help in the town and the man because he violated his neighbor’s wife. So you shall purge the evil from your midst.”* Just last sabbath there had been another discussion about this!

And now, Mary came to him with this story. That she was with child? He knew how this happened! It was not HIS child. He had not heard any screams for help. That could only mean one thing. It meant that being a righteous man, there was only one thing for him to do.

The pain—well it was more than he could fathom, but in his heart he knew that the law was there for a reason—to protect them, to make them different. Without the law—the

¹ <http://sechangersoni.be/EN/5EN-Tales/StonesPebblesSand.htm>

There are many variations on this. One has the professor pouring a couple beers in at the end to remind the listeners that there is always time for a beer with a friend! But you get the point!

lines would get blurry. People wouldn't know how to act. People wouldn't know who was righteous. You wouldn't know who was like you; you wouldn't know who you are.

The law was what kept Joseph's life together. And it is what keeps our lives together. We all have those laws. For some they are the religious laws we have heard intoned from the pulpit. Some are drawn from the Bible—thou shalt not...

But others have been forged from our culture: you don't dance, play cards, go to movies. There are members here who can recall the first time they broke one of those commandments.

You don't read those books, watch that station, vote for that party. It is how we separate ourselves from them.

You don't ask that question, you don't change the way we've always done things, you don't want to be like them. It is how we know who we are. And Joseph—the only thing we really know about him—he was a righteous man. He followed the rules.

Until now. This was a time when love demanded that the rules no longer be the master. He wasn't going to throw them all away, but if he was to have love, if he was to be loving, it meant that this time, the law needed to be trumped.

For love to live, to thrive, Joseph also had to deal with his shame. The decision to take Mary as his wife—to not do the easy thing, to follow the law, meant that he was opening himself to a world of shame.

Not guilt! There is a difference! Paul Tournier, the Swiss psychologist-theologian made a distinction. Guilt, he said, is something we need to apologize for. It comes from what we have done. Shame comes when we fail to live up to our expectations, or those of others and many times gets internalized to the point that it becomes who we are. Many times they go hand in hand—but many times shame becomes toxic and totally debilitating. Shame makes us feel as if we are not worthy of the love that is being offered.

Joseph had not done anything wrong! He had no guilt! There was nothing to apologize for. But when the people heard the news, when they saw Mary with her bulging belly...well the tsk tsk tsk came! He felt it with every glance, with every whisper, with every lost customer. And it would have been easy, easy for him to believe that he did not deserve the incredible gift that he had been given.

How often is that our case? We just don't believe we deserve love. We have heard the messages from the media that tell us if only we will lose 20 pounds; if only we will hold our marriage together; if only we can find a spouse; if only we can get that job; if only—then we will be worthy of being loved. Until then...well we are not good enough. The shame can just crowd out any chance of love surviving.

Somewhere, somewhere along the way Joseph had been able to escape that toxic shame cycle. He felt the love of his family, his fiancé, his God. He felt it from himself. And that is so important—when we are able to nurture love. Brené Brown has put it so well. She is convinced that until we are able to move beyond the shame that enslaves us, that we can't experience love, that we can't love others. She writes, *"We cultivate love when we allow our most vulnerable and powerful selves to be deeply seen and known, and when we*

honor the spiritual connection that grows from that offering with trust, respect, kindness, and affection.

Love is not something we give or get; it is something that we nurture and grow, a connection that can only be cultivated between two people when it exists within each one of them—we can only love others as much as we love ourselves.”²

Joseph had cultivated love in himself, and so he was able to find a space in his life for that love to grow, space in his life to love Mary, and this child.

There is so much that we try to stuff into our lives. Some of it is just junk, but there is also so much good. Hope; Peace, Joy—the things that make life meaningful—for us and others. We need to make sure that we get them in. But the truth is, that we need to be sure that love goes in first. It is the most important! It does open us to the other great Advent attributes; it does open us to God.

What a wonderful Christmas gift!

² Brene Brown. *The Gifts of Imperfection*. Hazelden, 2010. iBooks