Genesis 18:1-10

 Psalm 15

Colossians 1:15-28

Luke 10:38-42

LOVE LIKE A RIVER Sermon for July 21, 2019

By Rev. Dr. Don Algeo

Back in the day when I was even more foolish than I am today, I once attempted to walk the length of Hell's Canyon, which is a sort of mini-version of the Grand Canyon that lies along part of the border between Oregon and Idaho.

Just as the Grand Canyon was carved out by the Colorado River, Hell's Canyon was carved out by the Snake River, which is a pretty good-sized river in its own right.

Although there are plenty of snakes in Hell's Canyon, and some of them played a role in my ill-fated hike through it, that's not where the river got its name. It's called the Snake River because it twists and turns a lot, something you become very aware of if you try to parallel its course on foot.

But of course that twisting and turning is common to most all rivers, unless they're traveling through soft soil, or gotten to be so big and deep that they overwhelm any hard materials that might lie in their path. Most rivers from the sky look a lot more like Oak Orchard Creek than they do the mighty Mississippi.

It's interesting to contrast rivers with canals. Canals are straight and even. When a canal comes to a section of hard rock, it doesn't work its way around it. They bring dynamite in and blast the rock so that the canal can continue straight through it.

The question I'd like us to think about this morning is, What is Christian love like? Is it more like a canal, or more like a river?

With that question in mind, let's read today's gospel passage together.

Luke 10: 38-42

This is one of the stories *about Jesus*we find in the Gospels. When we read the gospel accounts, I thinks it’s helpful to keep separate the accounts that are primarily reports of what Jesus said from those that primarily show us something about Jesus. When we read the Sermon on the Mount or one of his parables, these are clearly speeches and stories that he deliberately constructed and probably gave utterance to on more than one occasion.

When we read these parts of the gospels, our main focus must be on seeking to understand what Jesus meant by what he said, what he was trying to communicate to his listeners and, through them, to us. If I may put it this way with reverence, we are trying to understand the **mind** of Jesus

But there are many others parts of the Gospels which are primarily about Jesus. Even though there may be an utterance or a phrase involved, these episodes are primarily about the way he handled himself and the way he related to others, and are offered to us by the Gospel writers mainly to show us something of what Jesus was like, how he dealt with people and reacted to different situations. Although it is obviously not a clear distinction, I think it's justifiable to say that the Gospel writers in these passages are trying to communicate to us, not so much his thought processes, but more his human personality.

The Gospels of Luke and John are especially rich with this sort of information. When we see Jesus spending an afternoon in conversation at a well in Samaria, or rescuing a wedding in Cana, or stopping in the middle of a crowd in Capernaum to respond to a long-suffering woman, or having a testy conversation with a haughty Pharisee while a woman of ill-repute is wetting his feet with tears and drying them with her hair, and here, in our reading for today, where he interacts with a pair of sisters, what we are seeing is not carefully constructed teaching. These aren't things Jesus planned to say or do, events or speeches he shaped to make a particular point. What the Gospel writers are showing us is just what he did, how he reacted, in these particular real-life situations.

Just recently in the hospice residence, we had an elderly woman as a resident: ninety-nine years, in fact, although still fully alert and physically able. But in the last year or so, she developed a cancer that spread hideous tumors that covered most of her face and head. And never once did she complain, never once was she anything except friendly and gracious.

She didn't teach or instruct anyone about anything; but everyone who spent time with her – family, staff, people like me – all learned a great deal about human dignity and courage, not by intellectual engagement, but by personal, face-to-face experience.

God is love, John tells us, and the Apostle Paul tells us in our passage from Colossians today than in Jesus was to be found all the fullness of God. So when we see how Jesus actually behaves, we are seeing how love – not the love you see in the movies or hear about in romantic songs – but the love that is the essence of God actually is like in real human situations.

The account of this particular episode in the life of Jesus is only a few verses long. Jesus, presumably part of a much larger group, arrives at the house of two sisters in the village of Bethany, right outside Jerusalem. The elder sister, Martha, is fussing about preparing a suitably grand meal for this important visitor and his companions, while the younger sister, Mary, sits quietly near Jesus, listening to what he has to say. Martha asks Jesus to prompt her sister to help, and Jesus, in a somewhat enigmatic way, seems to take Mary's side.

The typical 'theological' way of interpreting this episode is something along these lines: Jesus is teaching that the order of spiritual priority is first to find rest in him, and then to proceed to the problems of life. And that's a perfectly sound message, but in a peculiar way, it seems to me to sap the life out of this account. I don't think Luke was giving us this picture to advance our theological understanding; I think he was showing us what Christ was like, which is showing us what God's love is like.

Jesus has been traveling on foot around Israel for three years, training his disciples and delivering the gospel in every town he came to. He himself had warned those who wished to follow him that they would have no place to lay their heads. He had arrived at the solemn determination to make the final journey to Jerusalem, and he knew his own death would await him there. He was struggling with the requirement of bending his own will to the will of God his father, a struggle that would continue and continue to exhaust him right up until the last night in Gethsemane.

He arrived at this little house in Bethany, and what did he hope to find there? Surely an evening of peace, a night of rest. The last thing he wanted was a fuss.

Our translation quotes Jesus as saying, “Martha, Martha, you are worried and troubled about many things. But one thing is needed, and Mary has chosen that good part...” That's the line that has prompted all the theological reflection. But the original Greek can be translated in many ways. When I read it, I hear Jesus saying, “Martha, Martha, please, just a simple, quiet meal tonight; that's all I want.”

What Luke is showing us is that Jesus, who is love incarnate, could get tired. He's showing us that love doesn't always have one face, doesn't always have an unwavering momentum and vitality, that love, even God's love, is something that accommodates itself to the circumstances.

When love comes up against a rock, it needn't pull out dynamite and smash its way through. Love isn't like a canal; it's like a river.

Martha loved Jesus as much as Mary did. Martha's failure was not that her love wasn't strong enough, it was that her love wasn't flexible enough. It was a full-bore, head on, devil take the hindmost love.

And we've all known folks like that, haven't we? We've all known good, well-meaning Christian folks, who inject their goodness into every situation, fully confident that the power of their own good intentions must overrule everything else. If I may change the image, they are like engine-powered boats that can muscle their way through any water, no matter how rough and no matter which way the winds are blowing.

But what Luke is showing us is that perfect Christian love is more like a sailboat, a transportation that adapts itself to the wind and the conditions of the sea.

Paul was addressing this same teaching in his first letter to the Corinthians when he wrote:

***19****Though I am free of obligation to anyone, I make myself a slave to everyone, to win as many as possible.****20***[*To the*](https://www.biblehub.com/greek/3588.htm)[*Jews*](https://www.biblehub.com/greek/2453.htm)[*I became*](https://www.biblehub.com/greek/1096.htm)*like a Jew to*[*win*](https://www.biblehub.com/greek/2770.htm)[*the Jews.*](https://www.biblehub.com/greek/2453.htm)*…****21****To those without the law I became like one without the law*…(1 Cor: 9)

In our ordinary human world, we admire and often reward those who plow steadily forward, who stick to their guns, who are single-minded in the accomplishment of their goals. These are the people who sweep others off their feet, the people we applaud for their tenacity and admire for their focus. They look neither to the right not to the left. When knocked down, they get back up and keep marching straight ahead. They bend the world to their will. They get things done.

And it certainly true that the world gives high grades to people like that, and worldly success often awaits them.

But Jesus said, *My kingdom is not of this world.*

It is always important to remember that Jesus does not offer a rival to the world, a way of doing things that the world will acknowledge is superior to its own, and reward it accordingly. We must always remember that Jesus concludes His list of beatitudes with this final very difficult saying:

“*Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.* (Matthew 5: 10.)

And that among his final warnings to them was that:

*...you will be hated by all nations for my name’s sake.*(Matt. 24: 9)

The ways of the world are not the ways of heaven. What works here doesn't necessarily work there, and vice versa.

Christian love – the guiding principle of heaven – is like a river, not a canal. Jesus speaks gently to Martha, not the way he spoke to Peter at Caesarea when he said to him: *Get thee behind me, Satan.*Yet in both cases, it was love speaking.

Jesus once put a child on his lap and told his students they must become like the child. Jesus on another occasion took a whip and drove money changers out of the temple. In both cases, it was love acting.

Jesus spoke a word to one blind man, and rubbed muddy spit onto the eyes of another. In both cases, it was love healing.

That's what Christian love is: tentative, careful, respectful of the life situation of its recipients. It doesn't insist, it doesn't destroy, it doesn’t advance its own interests it doesn’t forge ahead, looking neither to the right nor to the left. True Christian love, the love modeled to us by Christ himself, probes and explores and does its best in its own patient way. Sometimes it even admits defeat and washes around, for the sake of moving on. Just like a river.

And so, gracious God, our prayer for this morning is for patience in love, for the willingness to acknowledge our own weakness, for the strength to endure the thought that Your ways, the ways of heaven, are slow and uneven and sometimes seem to fail. We pray for the faith that those ways, however ineffective they may be judged by the world's standards, are still the true ways of love, the true ways of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ, in whose name we pray.