

A New Command (Part Two)

“Love one another”

John 13:31-35

The safety, security and future of the world – in other words, its salvation – depends on places where love is learned and practiced and spread. Over this past holiday season my friend Tony came to me and told me I had to read Brian McLaren’s *The Great Spiritual Migration*. It took little persuading. McLaren was already one of my go-to Christian authors.

But this is, I think, his best book yet. He tells of leaving ministry for full-time teaching and writing. And he found it an interesting experience just sitting in a pew listening. He found that what he needed as a member was different than what had preoccupied him as a pastor, that he didn’t need clever sermons or a certain style of music. He didn’t need a church that was “cool” or contemporary, or big or small. And he certainly didn’t need a church whose primary goal was to police his belief system. Instead what he needed was a church that would help him live a life of love. That’s it.ⁱ

And the more he thought about it the more sure he was that’s what Jesus had been teaching all along. And he began to wonder what would happen if everyone knew that certain churches were just that – schools where love is learned, where “the curriculum” is learning all the many, many skills that go into really loving. Because it doesn’t just happen.ⁱⁱ

So imagine, as McLaren does, a place that teaches common courtesies, gratitude, admitting weaknesses and failures, expressing hurt and disappointment, confronting and forgiving, asking for help, learning to differ graciously, negotiating competing desires, taking the first step to resolve conflict.ⁱⁱⁱ

Stop for a moment here! Are you good at this stuff? At any of this stuff? Me, not so much. So what, McLaren asks, about winning and losing graciously, upholding wise boundaries, saying yes and no, creating win-win outcomes, speaking truth in love, contesting what’s not loving and is in fact damaging? Love means all these things, and it doesn’t just happen.^{iv}

McLaren goes on consider other matters. Honestly, what does a loving person look like in today’s world? How does love manifest itself differently in different personality types? Do you know? I’ve never given it all that much thought. What love lessons are appropriate for toddlers, young children, preteens, teenagers, young adults, engaged couples, married couples, young parents, parents of teens, parents of adults, grandparents, widows and widowers? Who’s teaching this stuff? And where? What does it mean to love strangers? What does it mean to love enemies in our particular context, in our particular economic and political context? How does one process feelings of anger, prejudice, revenge, fear, resentment or exhaustion – and find somehow a way to move toward love? What music, rituals, prayers, and daily devotional practices would contribute to the development of loving people? And when people wander from the ways of love, how do we best bring them back?^v

And so here we are, good people, but sort of counting on all this stuff just happening. But maybe it doesn't. Maybe there have to be places that help us live a life of love. Maybe that's what the church is supposed to be doing. If churches don't, who is?

Of course, here's the problem. I don't know how to do all this stuff. Because truly almost no one's doing it. So I can't. But just maybe we could. Together we could. In fact, if we tried, I'm sure we could.

Just begin to imagine what it would be like if people in our area knew that there's a church that helps people live a life of love. That's what it does. And it doesn't say or do anything that draws it away from doing this.

So the question becomes, "What do we do in this place?" and the answer is, "We learn to live a life of love." Or the question comes, "What is your church like?" and the answer is, "It's a place that helps us live a life of love."

Just imagine! My hunch is that this is what Jesus meant when he gave his disciples this last great new command, "Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another." And we've sort of always known this. In the words of the great carol we sing,

"Truly he taught us to love one another;
His law is love and His gospel is peace.
Chains shall He break, for the slave is our brother,
And in his name all oppression shall cease."

Just imagine the possibilities. But it begins – here and now, right in front of us, with our taking one another seriously and determining that we really will love one another, each of us, all of us. We will be here for one another. It's the telltale sign. It's how you tell whether we've got it or not. As Jesus has loved us, we will love one another. And doing this, we will begin to change the world. But it always starts with what we do with the people right in front of us. And it takes new birth. It goes against almost everything we have ever heard. Learning to live a life of love takes: starting over, burying the past, spiritual resurrection, living consciously in the presence of the Spirit of God. It takes focus, and concentration, and hard work.

But just imagine the possibilities.

– Dale Pauls

ⁱ Brian D. McLaren, *The Great Spiritual Migration: How the World's Largest Religion Is Seeking a Better Way to Be Christian*, 50-51.

ⁱⁱ Ibid., 54.

ⁱⁱⁱ Ibid., 58.

^{iv} Ibid., 58

^v Ibid., 242