

## **The Fruit of the Spirit: The Labour of Love**

Luke 14:7-14, Hebrew 13:1-5 by Patty Friesen (Labour Day, September 1/19)

Call to Worship: Psalm 84:1-4

Every Monday morning, I meet Lois Siemens, chaplain at Bethany Manor, for a swim and breakfast at Smitty's in Lawson Heights mall. We talk about work and family. The other Monday morning, two couples in their 80s from Bethany Manor, both recently married for the second time were walking down the mall holding hands. I thought - that's what love is - holding hands in your 80's while walking in Lawson Heights Mall. I want to be doing that when I'm 80, I told Patrick. He said I'll be doing it with my second husband because my first husband doesn't believe in Public Displays of Affection. It's not his "love language" but maybe after 23 years of marriage he can learn a new love language:)

I haven't preached a wedding sermon for a long time because we seem to have more funerals than weddings, but I got to preach Art's funeral sermon on love in 1 Corinthians 13 and that was more powerful for me than any wedding sermon I've preached because the love we were talking about wasn't the flush of young romantic love but the tested, hard won love of 60 years of marriage with Edna and 60 years of service love to the larger community with Mennonite Disaster Service and Shekinah Retreat Centre. I also preached about the loves of Deanna's life at her funeral - her marriage to John for 52 years last month, with her children and grandchildren testifying to her love at her funeral and even her nurses and care aides felt her love this past year. I'm beginning to think that funerals are better places to talk about love than weddings - because at funerals we look back at the proof of love - instead of forward to

the hope of it. We know the fruit of love because we have been practicing it for decades.

Love is the first fruit of the Spirit because it is the starting point in our life in God. From Psalm 81 in our call to worship we receive love from God as a free gift. God chose to help us, save us, love us but after that love between humans is rarely a choice. We don't choose our parents or siblings. We don't choose our co-workers or neighbours. From our families of origin to our children, to our neighbours and our communities - we have little choice of who enters our lives and whom we work and live and worship with and are called to love. We may choose friends, choose our adopted children and our partners - but that's only the initial choice we get with regard to love but even that often ends up requiring work and discipline. Yes, discipline. The discipline and discipling of love suggests that love is a school, a place of teaching and a willingness to learn with the people we are stuck with. It is a give and take where each person learns from the other and both grow stronger as a result of it. Relationships that are committed are a labour of love and like labour giving birth, it can be a real pain but pain that is borne willingly, even gladly, for the sake of something much greater.

Most people think that the toughest part of marriage is deciding whom we ought to marry, choosing the "right" person and whether or not we are really in love with them. The church traditionally has cared less about our emotional attachments and whom we are in love with. For most of the church's history, marriage occurred among couples who hardly knew each other before the wedding. The church cares more about whether we are the kind of people capable of sustaining the kind of commitment that makes love possible. The pastor leading the wedding ceremony doesn't ask, *Patty, do you love*

Patrick? No, she asks, Patty, *will* you love Patrick? Love is defined here as something we promise to rehearse, to practice, to learn from, to work at - the *result* of a marriage - not the *cause* of the marriage.

Comedian Garrison Keillor says Marriage is living with your best-informed critic - someone who knows our very worst and is willing to call us on it and to sometimes put up with it. The very nature of marriage means saying yes before you know what it will cost. Though you may say the "I do" of the wedding ceremony in all sincerity, it is the testing of that vow over time that makes you *married*. (Norris, *Acedia*, p. 200)

Theologian Stanley Hauerwas has argued that we always marry the wrong person. That is, we never marry the one we thought we were marrying - because marriage changes us. So you wake up one day and realize that the person next to you is not the person you committed your life to five years ago. Of course you are not the same person either. What do you do? If marriage consists of having made the *correct* choice of the *right* person to whom you have fallen madly and blindly in love with, you are in big trouble. The person has changed and so have your emotions. Nobody ever chose to marry a person who is addicted to alcohol, or who develops a terminal illness. But sometimes you wake up in a marriage and that is the person you've got.

Being a parent is like that too. Parents never get the children they thought they were birthing or adopting. That's why the term "planned parenthood" is misleading, as if it is only desirable to have children if you have planned or chosen them. Who plans to have a child with physical or mental challenges? Or an angry rebellious child who runs away to play drums in a rock and roll band? Sometimes we get such a child. And what

then? We can choose an automobile, but you can't choose a child. You must receive a child. The Bible says a child is a gift, not a possession or a project.

Nobody knows what they are getting into as a husband, wife, parent or child. Pre-marital counselling doesn't prepare us for what lies ahead. You can't prepare for how annoying another person can be. You can't prepare for all the ways a child will challenge you, disappoint you and worst of all, come to look just like you, only to desert you for an expensive university. We need more regular teaching in worship and conversations between the generations about love and commitment. The trick is preparing for a lifetime of commitment to someone who is always changing. And because we can't prepare for and can't control the end result of relationships, we need some means of strength and guidance in them.

What we need is some means of turning our fate into our destiny. As Christians, our faith provides us the means to live together as parents, children, husbands, wives, friends, neighbours, church members and community members. We didn't choose Jesus as our Saviour. He came to us, not the other way around. John's Gospel makes this explicit: Jesus says to his disciples, "you didn't choose me. I chose you so that you might bear fruit" (John 15:16). And because God has chosen us and continues to care for us, we are free to risk being faithful, even to those whom we didn't choose, even with those whom we are stuck with for the rest of our lives. (William Willimon, *The People We Are Stuck With*, p. 173-4).

Our fall worship series on the Fruit of the Spirit will help us reflect on what qualities help us become the kind of people capable of sustaining love and commitment

needed in our neighbourhoods, marriages, families, workplaces, volunteering and church community. Let us pray...

Gracious God, you loved us first and chose us before we had any choice in the matter. Help us live out of this depth of love towards our parents and siblings, our partners, children and friends, neighbours, co-workers, church and community members. Give us the fruit of the spirit we need for this task – enough love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control, Amen.