

THE FINE PRINT

Next Sunday is Mother's Day.

Our church rightly desires to NOT alienate or segregate, even if that means NOT making a big deal about "Mother's Day."

My mother would be greatly disappointed. She enjoyed basking in the honour of Mother's Day. She grew up in an era when woman were limited, and that was unfortunate. Even so, we should grant Mothering its due praise and admiration..... because "mothering" is much more than physically giving birth to a child.

Mothering is NOT conditional, and it is not gender limited.

Mothering is nurturing and protecting, and more. It is living and being Agape Love.

Agape is a Greek word for altruistic love: a deep from the heart nurturing love. This is the "mothering" love God often demonstrates to us, and it is the love that was lived and proclaimed by Jesus.

Mothering love / Agape love is beautiful, life giving and ... often inviting. In the spirit of Agape love, we have chosen to honour the Love, INSTEAD of the position because we don't want to alienate and hurt those NOT included.

With that said, I'd like to share a Russian folktale that is called:
"My mother is the most beautiful woman in the world."

A long time ago, a little girl named Varya happily travelled to the village with her mother. But the village was big, with many people.

In the crowd, at the village square, they became separated. She lost her mother, and began to cry. Some villagers came to her aid, and asked, "Why are you crying?" Varya said fearfully, "I am crying because I have lost my mother." And, then the villagers asked, "Who is your mother? What does she look like?"

Varya answered, "My mother is the most beautiful woman in the whole world."

The villagers laughed and said, "Well, if your mother is very beautiful, then we will be able to find her quickly."

Many of the villagers started searching through the crowd for a beautiful woman. They found women with flowing long hair, woman with symmetrically perfect faces with fine features, woman with idealized figures and women with glamorous clothes, BUT none were the girl's mother.

Suddenly, a woman pushed through the crowd and called out, "Varya! Oh, my precious little child."

Varya cried joyfully, "Mummy!" and they embraced tightly.

Varya proudly said to the villagers, “This is my mother, and she is the most beautiful woman in the world.”

And, the villagers saw that Varya’s mother was exceptionally beautiful.

No ONE noticed that her clothes were well worn, her eyes were small, that her skin was sunburned, that her nose was a little big and that she had a figure like a potato. They only saw that she was glowing with love for her child, and her child was reflecting that love, too.

Varya’s mother smiled and said, “Many people perceive things only with their eyes, but,.... as you can notice, my Varya perceives with her heart.”

Agape love sees the real beauty. Lives the beauty, and is beautiful.

The word Jesus uses for Love in the Great Commandment, from the John passage, is Agape!

* We are to love one another, which means everyone,... with Agape love. We are to love as Jesus loved.

We are to live and regard all people with mothering love – Agape love.

And, when we do, ...we are told, all will know that we are followers of Christ, because our love will shine.... and all will see the beauty of Christ.... the beauty of God – the source of Love.

Jesus’ Commandment for us is to love one another with Agape love, just as if they are our own children.

This presents a monumental problem..... because..... well.... most labelled Christians are NOT being very obedient.

Apparently, there is a conditional statement to this Commandment.

Perhaps, it is in the “Fine Print” at the bottom? {look in Bible }

I can’t see it, but then again, my eyes are not the best,... anymore.???

But, it must be there, and it must state the exceptions to this rule.

Isn’t this interesting? Most of don’t read the fine print: you know what I mean, such as those long,.... contract conditions, with a computer program, that prompts, “Do you accept these conditions?” ...or... “Click Yes to these terms of agreement to continue.”

Who reads all that stuff? Do you?

Right before my surgery, outside the operating room, I was handed some papers to sign. A nurse gave me cursory review of what it said, and obediently, I signed where I was told to sign.....

... maybe I should not have?

The point is, unless it deals with money, we rarely read the fine print, and here we have a situation, where we can’t see the fine print, yet behave as if it is there..... most interestingly????

There must be an exception to this commandment, ...maybe in #2 font?

[]..... because we tend to be pretty selective about who we love and treat as our own, such as “that” rude clerk at the store.... or that Air Canada person?

You know what I think? I think we've scribbled in our own stipulations. I bet we've determined that "love one another" really means.... those nice people that are around us.... that act like us....that look like us?

Surely, Jesus didn't mean for us to love with Agape love the person who commits a crime against us?..... or the enemy we are at war against. Surely, God doesn't want us to love those people?

And, Just a reminder: Agape love doesn't point guns at people, even if they have guns, nor does it try to bomb them, humiliate them, torture them.... or hand them over to be tortured.... or... dehumanize them in any fashion. Let's remember: Agape love is a caring/ nurturing, altruistic love..... I thought I would mention that again, in case we forgot..... what Jesus was talking about. ...

There are many other examples of how we ignoring or altering the Love Commandment.

It is tempting to shop at stores that offers the cheapest prices, even though some of their products have come from unjust systems that exploited and abused people, plants or animals.... /// Our wallet may be a road block for Agape love.

And yes, our awareness is increasing in regards to fair-trade and exotic justice issues, and our behaviour is trying to catch up.

Yet, in some areas, in our own North American culture, we are slipping behind. The Rich are getting richer and the poor poorer, and many think the system is fair,.... and poor are slipping because they are not as smart or don't work hard enough. Yet, in 1961, corporate income tax was 21%, and personal income tax was 32%. By the mid 90s, the corporate rate was down to 7%, while personal income tax rates increased,..... and that trend has continued. (I couldn't find the latest figures). In the US, over 60% of corporations do not pay any taxes.

In addition, the very affluent have loop-holes and other ways of protecting their money from taxation.

The bottom line: those with less money are now paying more than their fair share.

To make matters worse, those making the least income were hit hardest by this recession. The affluent and upper middle class, hardly felt it, YET,..... aid is pouring out in the form of tax breaks.... And who really gains from tax breaks? ????

NOT the poor and those making around minimum wage.

Not very many of them gathered in a thousand dollars for remodelling the home they don't even own. And, a chunk of that money came from those who received little in return for those at the low end.

And, ... and.... our national budget is going in the red, so services may be reduced, and fees may need to be charged for what was once provided, and a \$25 fee is not much, for most of us,..... but for some it is a millstone around the neck.... while struggling to keep the head above water.

Our economic system is NOT fair, and certainly not loving.

Even Mennonite Trust offers better interest rates for bigger investments.
If you have more money, then you'll make more money.
??HOW does agape love fit into that formula??
Yet,.... we accept these attitudes..... we go along.... Because...??? why????

Does love one another mean loving more those who have more money? Do we love only those who look like us.... or act like us.... or have the same values and attitudes?

For the most part..... I'm preaching to the choir. I think most of us try very hard to be inclusive, just and loving. Many of us are working against the norm to make the world a better place,.... yet.... we still need to be reminded about the Great Commandment / about Agape love which is God's love for us and how we are to love others.

In addition, we need to realize that Christianity, as a whole, has an identity crisis. Love is not the dominate theme or regard, and the rest of the world knows this.
Non-Christians may not regard us by our love.... by our love.... No... they may not recognize us by our love.....

I wonder,??..... actually, I don't need to ponder what much of the Muslim world thinks of Christianity.
To be sure, the Western Christian world has invested a lot of money in Iraq and Afghanistan,... but NOT in a very loving manner.

As people who strive to be followers of Christ—people who try to radiate the love of God, we need to put our focus and energy on the love, and less on the label of Christianity.

I'm not suggesting we abandon the label, not at all. However, being a Christian should NOT mean joining a club or even a religious group, and it definitely DOES NOT mean conformity,.... yet...sadly those overtones are sometimes present.

A Christian is a person who.... for many reasons, including feeling the touch of God's Spirit,.... has chosen to follow the way of Christ.
We call this journey the salvation process, and it may start in a profound manner, but usually the shift happens over time. Either way, we followers of Christ have encountered / we have been moved by God through Jesus..... and we are NOW, by the power and grace of God, trying to do agape love towards all people.

The rest of what forms Christianity—the religion is just trim/ the seasonal decor.

Sometimes that decor says, “All public schools should say the Lord's Prayer”, and sometimes it declares strange things about the Biblical message, such as creation was limited to a 144 hour event six thousand years ago.
Once upon a time, the seasonal decor stated that women couldn't preach and pianos didn't belong in church. I remember, when the Christian flavour didn't include dancing or owning playing cards.

Those seasonal add-ons are mostly meaningless decorations.
Even so, the add on trim can weigh a person down and be a distraction, and Sometimes they can be the fine print to the Great Commandment. And, anything that diminishes gracious, accepting love, is wrong!

It wasn't that long ago, when remarried divorced people were NOT allowed to be part of the Christian mosaic.

Sometimes..... we thought we were Commanded to judge, instead of doing LOVE. We are still learning, and there is a lot of opportunity for grace..... all around.

Again, let us be reminded, that Love is the theme.

Jesus did not proclaim a new religion. Jesus did not strive to be a cult hero or the perfect Jew.

He did not seek out adulation for good behaviour.

Jesus was NOT a legalist, in fact he broke religious laws, and at times engaged in his culture's taboos.

The message /the life was LOVE. Jesus was presenting God. God is love.

Jesus lived and proclaimed –Agape love... which includes justice, peace and grace,..... and love is Inviting by it's very nature, and love is inviting because it is contagious.

Love is inviting; it is inclusive.

The New Testament church was tempted to be an “exclusive club”.

Peter started down that road, but had a great vision/ a dream a message from God. He was reminded that love is accepting/ love is inviting.

Listen again to verse 12 of Acts 11, “The Spirit told me to go with them (those considered unclean / those who were different), and to NOT make a distinction between them and us!”

Make no distinction: regardless of title, of ethnic origin, of culture of sexual orientation or size of one's wallet, we are not to separate, we do not judge. We make No distinction.

We do love. Period.

Peter went on and stated that God reaches out to those who are different, and that we should NOT hinder the activity of God.

God creates all things as the Psalm passage notes, and God is love.

In addition, even Paul echoed the same message of Agape love: being nurturing, loving and inviting with altruism.

I do believe there is FINE print in the Bible, and by that I don't mean “fine” as in small font, footnotes or a sub-text.

By FINE.... I mean excellent, wonderful.... BEAUTIFUL.

God ... through the Bible and through Christ invites us to see the beauty in life, in all things and all people,.... by receiving and being Agape love.

And,.....that is truly beautiful.

I am very glad to say that our church strongly tilts on the side of love and grace, and that is wonderful.

We've presented the message for all to see that we are:

A Welcoming Christian Community for Peace.

Here is part of the explanation that was used when we first introduced that message as a beckon for our church, the "Welcoming part:

Welcoming - This is definitely a pro-active word that strongly infers being inclusive. It also embraces the standards of hospitality, which is highly valued in the Bible. There are no "ifs" or "buts" implied; in other words, all are welcome to our church, and no one has to change to be like us before they receive our embracing hospitality. We are a WELCOMING church, and we desire to continue to be one.

We are a welcoming church, and I'm glad to report that we have the reputation of being very tolerant and accepting.

Our "judgment" standards are considered low.

I mention this ... not so we can boast, but so that we may be encouraged. We are heading in the right direction.

Because Following Christ is not static, just as love is NOT a destination.

We are in process; being and doing Agape love means that we are learning, growing and changing.

We may laugh at the old Christian decor, such as the rule that stated no musical instruments allowed,... yet we have created new decorations... that can send out an unwelcoming message to those who are different than us. Those who were once outcasts are now making the rules, too.

The NT church also struggled with the temptation to build comfort walls to form a sense of safety and the calm of conformity.

Yet, walls also block the light – they will keep out Christ and hinder God's love.

Let us NOT rest on our laurels and achievements, but instead,... as Peter did..... may we invite the HOLY Spirit to give us dreams.

Let us be willing to risk it all for the sake of God's love.

Let us wear our magnificent building out in service for others.

Let us search for new ways of being inviting and welcoming.

Let us be open to change so everyone will feel invited.

Let us dream of flying into a new place, and have the confidence that all will be well.....

Because we have LOVE.

Let us receive God's dreams for us, and never hinder love.

May God be with you, and you, and you.... and me.

Amen.