

WEIGHTLESS MESSAGE

Sometimes ..... it is hard to say,.... "I love you."  
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In the States, Monday is memorial day. Memorial day is like Remembrance Day. November 11<sup>th</sup>, in the States, is called Veterans Day. They have two holidays that try to say to their soldiers, "We appreciate you; we love you." BUT,..... actions can speak louder than words. Sending young people to three, even four tours of duty into combat, as has been the case lately,.... speaks a lot louder than parades and honour guards twice a year.

Action can speak louder than words, .... YET... words are important, and must be carefully chosen..... because words can be powerful, too.

I believe we need both actions and words to say "I love you."

In 1989, while at seminary, I was pastoring a church on the weekends. I recall my first Memorial Weekend sermon at that church.

It was in an American Baptist Church, in West Union, Ohio. I had only been there a couple months, and was just getting to know everyone. And, since I was relatively new, I was hesitant to really share my passions, but since it was Memorial weekend, I couldn't resist the opportunity to address militarism and nationalism.

West Union is a small town of 2,500, in the rural, hilly area of Ohio. It was in one of the poorest parts of the state; the culture had a strong Appalachian flavour to it. Unemployment was high, and less than 50% of the population graduated from High School, .... and they loved their gun culture.

I think every road sign, outside of town, was riddled with dimples and holes from bullets. I suppose people would drive around looking for something to shoot (that's a scary thought).

Needless to say, reflecting the culture,..... many people served in the military.

In spite of all that, the congregation was a wonderful group of kind people.

I wanted to share with them something that I believed to be very important which is that honouring and glorifying the military and past wars only perpetuates the cult of militarism, and doing that leads to more wars.

My sermon was followed the 10 minute reading of all the names of men who had served in past wars, including the Civil War and the 1848 war with Mexico.

In my sermon, I tried to stress that the best way to remember the veterans was to work at preventing more wars, and one way to do that was to **not** glorify soldiers.

In essence,..... I was trying to say that I care very much about them and all soldiers. I didn't want people to be maimed, scarred or killed.

>I didn't say it right. They didn't receive my intended message.

I knew that because, their church council met with me the following week, and shared their concern and disapproval. They were very gracious,.....and very clear with their message that they didn't want to hear any more anti-war or anti-soldier messages.

I didn't tell them, that while contemplating my sermon, I visited Cave Hill cemetery. Cave Hill is an historical cemetery in Louisville, KY. that has countless graves of soldiers. It started as a Civil War cemetery, but now is the resting place for soldiers of many other wars. I walked through the cemetery, I was deeply moved by all the white crosses – thousands and thousands and Thousands of young men who.....died too soon...

I should have told the people of the church about my walk through the cemetery and how I felt, but instead I declared that war was wrong, and implied that soldiering was bad, too. I didn't Listen to them and I was afraid to share my feelings – my heart's desire.

And,....my limited attempt to present *a compassion and share a love* didn't turn out so well.

Back in 2002 and 2003, I behaved in a similar way. I was appalled by America's *flippant* march to war. I shuttered to think of what was about to happen to the men, women and children of Iraq. Afghanistan was bad enough,.... and the US making things much worse, and.... in the process, planting the seeds for future terrorists – future Lee Harvey Oswalds, Timothy McFieghs and Osama bin Ladens. And,.... a Nation that goes to war is also teaching its children that violence solves problems. My dismay came through very clearly, and that can be appropriate. Just as Jesus clearing the temple was appropriate.

However, if our goal is to inform, inspire, to illuminate, and help others to understand peace and love..... Love for self and each other, then berating and caustic condemnation is not the best approach, and it can feel very judgmental and “heavy.”

Preparing for MC Canada's annual assembly, here in Saskatoon, Dan Dyck and I have been in communication about this very issue. Dan is the director of communications for Mennonite Church Canada; he is involved in implementing the resolution that our church sponsored last year. The resolution and what we hope to implement is about ...getting the Peace message out in the public square. An Ad company has been hired, and they have suggested some slogans / one-liners to use. Their suggestions are gentle and .... even watered down, yet.... YET ...the question to wrestle with is....what do we hope to accomplish? Do we want to shock people..... or should our message be easy to receive?

This Advertizing endeavour is NOT a CPT action; we are not trying to stop an action, but rather we seek to inform and inspire those in our culture, non-Mennonites, about peace. In essence, we care very much about our culture and our world, and we wish to end the suffering and destruction that comes from war,....by changing people to have a passion for peace and love, too.

YET, there is a huge risk in doing this, in going public.... because in so doing we are sharing our passion / our hearts. The outside world will be invited to take notice of us – to examine us....to view our love.

Therefore, **we are confronted** with the exacting question: What do we love?

Do we truly love each other as ourselves? Do we love God as God loves us? Do we love peace and justice?

Or..... do we love to be right more than we love strangers?

Do we love our tradition more than we love to be welcoming?

Do we love to be left alone more than we love to share?

Do we love our status and security more than we love to trust each other?... and so on.

And, if our love is altruistic, then HOW do we tell others, “We love them?”

Another example.

There was a young couple who had just met. They barely knew each other. I believe, they went out a couple of times. The guy was infatuated with her; he had one of those “I know I want to marry you” feelings, and so on the third date, he blurted out to her, “I LOVE YOU. I want to spent the rest of my life with you, and I want to marry you.”

A couple days later, he was in my office, very dismayed.... because she didn’t receive his message very well.

What he said was nice, and he sincerely meant it, BUT his message felt Really heavy to her. He chose good words and he was genuine, BUT... they were just words. There were NOT accompanied by Action!

Those same words, combined with trust building experiences together of “showing/ being love” would carry a very different message.

Sad to say, he scared her away.

Sometimes,.... it is hard to say, “I love you.”

Both of today’s passages contain instructions about **how to love**.

Both implore the reader / “us” to keep the commandments – to obey what God and Christ has commanded us to do.

Well, so far, .... that sounds like cryptic or indirect “love” at best.

Being told / commanded what to do.... can feel heavy like a burden.

Such as when, a parent tells a child, “don’t run across the street” or “be home at a certain time” or “brush your teeth” or “don’t talk to strangers” or “get your homework done”, ....and so on.

Those kind of “commandments come from love, but the words and message don’t sound or feel like “love.”

I think there is some of that parental advice in Biblical commandments, but.... for the most part, the commandments are about love.

And, Jesus even states that in the John 15 text, when he noted, “This is my commandment that you love one another as I have loved you.”

**I don't** believe God is presenting a conditional love, suggesting: "If you do such and such, then I'll love you." If you take out the garbage, then I'll love you. No, I believe the call to Obey the commandments is another way of saying, "BE the LOVE / DO the LOVE / The action is important." Words are not enough.

See the difference?

The difference is felt and experienced. In the first John passage, it states that God's commandments are **NOT burdensome** – they won't weigh us down. ....

A command that doesn't feel heavy or burdensome... must be something pleasing / something desirable. And,... if that is the case.... why call it a command. Why is "loving God and each other" a command?

Because..... sometimes we forget, and God knows that. The Old Testament is full of stories about people giving only token "lip service" to God.

Sometimes we forget the to show / be the love.... and sometimes we forget the words, too.

I don't believe that I need to explain that to most of you. Anyone who has been married more than a year, .... knows what I'm talking about.

Anybody in a relationship needs to periodically read these passages.

It is easy to get into a pattern / a rut... and before long our focus.... our passion turns to what we are doing and NOT to those we love,... and we forget / we neglect..... the actions of love.... and even the words.

This is true in any relationship. It is true in marriages. It applies to our relationship with God, and the relationship we call church.

Periodically, we need to be reminded to ask ourselves: what is important? Why are we alive? What are we doing? Into what are we investing our lives.....

What / who do we really love?

Moreover, do our words match our actions?

Do our actions match our words?..... or..... are we afraid to even say the words?

We Mennonites are pretty good about showing love to others; we do community and Christian service pretty well.

However, we are a little hesitant about proclaiming the words. The Gospel words of "I love you, and God loves you."

Both words and action are needed for the message to be complete and "weightless"—non-threatening.

Action alone lacks clarity, direction, guidance and focus without the word part of the message.

Random acts of kindness are nice and usually well received, but sometimes, if there is no explanation, no words it can leave the recipient feeling perplexed and uncomfortable. It is best and most effective to proclaim the message in words and deeds

Love is complete and understood when there is both action and words that match.

In addition, as I said we do community and acts of kindness / service to others very well, YET,.... how do we regard each other?

I think we are scared to death to say the personal words, "I love you."

Interesting.

A final twist: Jesus asserted that when there is love, the relationship changes. He is talking to his disciples, and Jesus tells them that in love / because of the love.... they are regarded as friends – the hierarchy / the imbalance is gone. There is respect and trust. Their relationship is no longer as a slave to a master. In love, they are friends – there is balance – the weight of imbalance is gone. They are friends.

This should not be a surprise. Love is very freeing... because it gives of self. Our great burden in life is our own Fear, and Love releases that.....because love changes the focus away from ourselves.

This is empowering: we can reach out and connect with those we love as equals, as friends. This applies to our peers to our spouses, and to our neighbours and enemies, .... and to soldiers and to Baptists and too.....

Who are we to love? Who do we love? And, how can we let them know?