

“The Gospel According to Tina Turner” or “What’s Love Got to Do With It?”

Matthew 22:34-45

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Well, it had to happen sooner or later. Tonight I bring you part one in the occasional sermon series called “Trashy Pop Music Goes to Church,” this time to see what R&B superstar Tina Turner has to say that might inform our faith and life as Christians. I also have something to say on Ricky Martin’s “Livin’ La Vida Loca,” but you will just have to wait for that one until the time is ripe. Now, although I do have legs as least as nice as Tina’s, unfortunately for you, you will not get to see me strut my stuff because I do have my modesty! Neither will I attempt to sing any of Tina’s songs, lest the sound system really start to feed back. But so that you will leave here with your money’s worth from Tina and not feel as though you have been a victim of the old bait and switch, I will remind you of her immortal, but rhetorical question which, I will suggest to you, might indeed have come straight out of the pages of the gospel: “What’s love got to do, got to do with it? What’s love, but a second hand emotion?”

The answer provided by all the Gospels, is of course, that love has everything to do with it, but also paradoxically that love indeed is a second hand emotion. Tina Turner’s Gospel song, “What’s Love Got to Do With It?” is about two lovers, one of whom has crossed that indelicate line in a relationship, and has declared true love for the other. And Tina’s response is: “don’t go spoiling a good

thing baby by gettin' all mushy on me. I don't have time or energy for romance and sentimentalism. I'm just in this thing to have a good time and if you bring that baggage on up in here with you, it's only going to wreck a good thing."

Well, as jaded and as cynical as that might be, Ms. Turner's rejection of her lover's affections is perhaps a good reminder for us not to let our Christian love become too clouded by emotion, lest we ruin a good thing. For Christians, love, the kind about which Jesus is speaking, must be a first hand experience, and then, perhaps, a second hand emotion. Jesus knows a little something about love, something we need to learn better each day. For us, love is one of those words in our vocabulary that is so dramatically overused that it has become nearly devoid of any meaning. It is in that category of words with democracy and truth and liberty that are dangerously close to becoming completely platitudinous or worthless, conveying only what any given Madison Avenue ad agency or politician attaches to them as in, "I just love those shoes, or that car, or that restaurant."

As trivialized as it may have become, love remains an important word to us. Love is the word we use to express the greatest intimacy between human beings. It is the word used to describe relationships between parents and children, spouses, friends, Christ and the Church. But love is also a word that can be used for almost any purpose under the sun and to justify almost any evil, as in "I love my country right or wrong" or "I only broke your nose because I love you." Perhaps one of the church's greatest challenges is to redeem the word "love" and re-invest it with the

meaning it deserves. And this is no small challenge because we are up against not only the infamous Madison Avenue, but even the inclinations of our hearts which betray our best attempts to express love of God and neighbor.

If we are going to use this passage to aid our mission of redeeming the word “love,” the place to start is by liberating love from its exclusive penthouse in the realm of emotions and allowing it to roam the street in the realm of action where it really belongs. In the first century mind, love didn’t have much to do with Valentines or even romance. It had to do with commitment – commitment to one’s family, one’s nation, one’s God. To say that you loved God, then, meant that you were completely devoted to your creator and were willing to do everything. It would not then have been about how you felt about God, but how well you kept the commandments; not how close you feel to God, but how willing you were to do what you were supposed to do, even when you didn’t feel close to God. Now, just as with love, it is a whole lot easier to be committed to one’s family or nation, than to a stranger. This is the twist about which Jesus reminds the lawyer and the other Pharisees, that our commitment cannot only be to those to whom we are easily or already committed, because of our feelings or relationships, but even those who would ordinarily fall outside the realm of consideration as worthy of our love. Remember that in Mark’s Gospel, this story is placed just after the story of the Good Samaritan, the point of which is to shed some Gospel light on just who is our neighbor. And *that* neighbor was outside the pale.

I began to learn a little about the truer nature of love in the early days of the campus chapters movement of Habitat for Humanity, when I was introduced to the words used to motivate me and countless other college students to build homes for the poor, words which come from the third chapter of First John: “Let us love, not in word or in speech, but in truth and in action,” and that is getting closer to the love Jesus is promoting here. But if we really want to get at what that love looks like, we’d be better off amending that verse to read: “Let us love, not in word or in speech or in pure emotion, but in truth and in action.” Jesus is not talking about feelings here; there are no warm fuzzies, cute puppies, or sunsets strolling on the beach. He is talking about keeping the commandments, loving God and loving neighbor. He is talking about the hard work of caring for widows and orphans, of making and keeping commitments with one another, of living simply so that others might simply live. You see, the Bible always talks about love as it relates to other people: “Beloved, love one another,” First John goes on to say. And “God loved us so much we ought to love one another,” and “those who love God must love their brothers and sisters.” Love is always directed toward others, and it seems clear that this is more than exchanging pleasantries as we pass one another in the supermarket or in the fellowship hall. The content of love is action and commitment.

A second characteristic of the love Jesus would have us reinvest with meaning is that our love must be a disinterested love if it is to reflect the love God

has shown in Christ. The idea of disinterested love is not an easy one to wrap one's mind around, but it is worth the effort. Disinterested love is neither self-interested love nor uninterested love, but rather, love that is not done in anticipation of any kind of payment or reward, present or future. It is love done not out of fear of punishment or consequences. Our love is perfected when it is given wholly on behalf of another and because it is what *they* need, not what we need. Disinterested love is love offered and expressed in action without ulterior motive, however benign that motive might be.

It is in the self-offering of Jesus Christ that we can see most clearly the disinterestedness of love, for it was an action taken solely for us, without benefit to God. God earned nothing in the transaction except pain and misery on a cross; we are the ones who have received God's love in the form of forgiveness and grace and love, all things which make our love possible. Recall how Paul describes Jesus in the second chapter of Philippians as the one who emptied himself and humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death. That, my friends, is love of God and love of neighbor. Disinterested love is the kind which can authentically act and truthfully say that "We love because he first loved us," not because we saw what there was in it for us, or because our guilt overwhelmed us, or even because our outraged sense of justice compelled us. Friends, a love based on a desire to get to heaven is a love based on self-interested love. A love based on a desire to avoid hell is a love based on self-interested love. Neither of these approaches reflects

God who simply loved us and enabled us to love. We are called to a disinterested love, not an uninterested love which does nothing or a self-interested love which does what makes itself feel good. We are called to the kind of love which does for others what others need to be made whole.

Having said all of this, an unemotional, disinterested love sounds like a very dry and abstract concept, and maybe a love only God is capable of attaining. But as hard as disinterested love might be for us to offer, it is not beyond our imagining, or at least Hollywood's. Not too long ago now, the movie *Gladiator* was all the rage, winning an Academy award and drawing comparisons to the 1960 Kirk Douglas and Stanley Kubrick epic, *Spartacus*, the story of a man who leads a slave revolt against the Romans. Here is an unemotional, disinterested love raised to an art form, literally. Toward the end of the movie, after Spartacus and his fugitive band have been finally captured by the Roman authorities, the Romans are trying to determine which among them is in fact the leader Spartacus, for though they have felt the sting of his blade, none has ever seen him. Failing to find out, they threaten to kill the slaves one by one until they find out which one is Spartacus, knowing that his loyalty for his men will flush the hero out. And their strategy works to perfection: Spartacus, played brilliantly by Kirk Douglas, strides forward and in a clear voice says, "I'm Spartacus." And just as he is about to be led away, another slave in the band, and I think it was Tony Curtis, but another slave in stands forward and proclaims, "No, I'm Spartacus!" And then another and then

another and another until the entire hillside is covered with men shouting “I’m Spartacus!” And the Romans have no choice but to crucify them all. None of these slaves thought of themselves first and none saw their love for Spartacus and each other expressed best with a Hallmark card. Each sacrificed himself for all the rest, and for the one who had led them so far on behalf of the slaves of the Empire.

If first century Rome is a little distant for you and you are not considering a revolution, perhaps an example closer to home might help. Many of you know that Flora and I were privileged to spend a week in Haiti at the LaCroix New Testament Mission, run by the incomparable Pastor Pierre who tells the story of his conversion from Voodoo to Christianity, who leads a spirited worship service and who introduces mission workers to hundreds of adorable children eager to get to know the Americans. Those who go to LaCroix are touched, transformed even, by the experience of poverty, the experience of seeing the red hair on black children, red hair that betrays their malnutrition; they are changed by the experience of seeing those same darling children playing in the raw sewage running through open ditches by the side of the road because there are no latrines in the village. In my experience, there is nothing glorious, romantic, cute, or cuddly about a latrine, but they are sorely needed. An unemotional, disinterested love should be such that we would be ready, willing and able to fly to Haiti, get on a cramped bus, drive the washboard road to La Croix, dig latrines for eight hours a day, and never even interact with the children for whom we toil, never hear Pastor Pierre’s touching

story, never even go to church. You see, people need latrines and we have the means to provide them. Please do not misunderstand me: I am not naive enough to think we can check our emotions at the door or ignore the fact that we have something to gain from the people of Haiti even while we show our love for them, and I'm not suggesting that we should approach it that way. But what I want you to think about is this: that we must be prepared to love people, actively love people, even when we don't feel like it and even when there is nothing to gain, and even when we don't get to have warm fuzzies about doing it. This is the kind of love Jesus wants the Pharisees to understand is at the root of all the laws given to them by God.

Few of us will have the opportunity to make such a noble statement of love as the followers of Spartacus, and I certainly hope I am not among those few! A few more of us will be fortunate enough to go to Haiti or some other, poverty-stricken place to offer our love to the people there, and I am gratified to have been one of those. But all of us are called upon daily in ways which will seem much less profound, much less obvious, and much less dangerous, but which will be no less important. Our unemotional, disinterested love will be found in every child's peanut butter and jelly sandwich we make when we are running late, and in every patient moment spent with an annoying classmate in distress, and in every traffic jam when we allow cars to merge one after another from opposite lanes. Ordinary,

everyday things all, but also awesome responsibilities that I hope that you will undertake seriously, and undertake with your best, disinterested love.

As much as at home or work, the church too needs the witness of your disinterested love, for the church is one of the few places where real love still stands a chance. The church needs to be here to receive people seeking God. It needs to be here for people facing death. It needs to be here to witness to the world that people are willing to make long-term commitments to one another when planned obsolescence is the order of the day. But these things don't happen without disinterested love. They don't happen unless our love takes action. That's why we are so serious about discerning God's vision for our love, for our disinterested use of ourselves as the heart, hands, and voice of Jesus Christ. Whatever that vision will be, we may be assured that we will be called to love both God and neighbor, with all our heart, and soul, and mind.

Loving "with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind" is a tall order. I know what I am asking of you is a hard calling and it is not my intention to leave you frustrated by presenting you with an impossible task, one achievable only by Christ himself. And so I offer you some appropriate words on love that I found on a scrap of paper in a book I inherited, and I hope they will be helpful: "God asks not that our love should equal God's, but resemble it; not that it should be of the same strength, but the same kind. A pearl of dew will not hold the sun; but it may hold a spark of its light. A child by the sea, trying to catch the

waves as they dash in clouds of crystal spray upon the sand, cannot hold the ocean in a tiny shell; but he can hold a drop of oceanwater.” A few of us might be called to be like Spartacus. But the rest of us will have to content ourselves with being the pearl of dew which catches God’s spark of the sun, or the seashell which holds a drop of God’s ocean, as we demonstrate God’s love in the actions that we take and the commitments we keep. Amen.