

*John Docherty, September 20, 2015*

### **Love God with your whole heart**

What does it mean to love God with our whole heart? Last week, Marc Paré made the case for understanding the biblical references to the heart not as the seat of our emotions and passions, but as the seat of our mind, our will, our consciousness. He explained that when the Bible calls us to love God and our neighbour, we are not primarily being asked to feel a particular fuzzy emotion toward God or our neighbour. He suggested that we are being asked to approach God "... with the attitude and the confidence of a child toward a parent ...".

And while that attitude and confidence may include an emotional content, it also includes notions of respect, obedience, and trust, and, in being called to love our neighbour as ourselves, we're being called to take care of each other in the same way that we take care of ourselves, regardless of how we might '*feel*' about each other.

But Marc also cautioned that he wasn't suggesting a strict Victorian, stiff upper lip, emotions-are-irrelevant, approach to loving God. He was simply trying to temper our tendency to overlay our current, somewhat romantic sense of what love entails on the scriptural passages we read.

So ... let me try to complicate that a little.

I'm not going to challenge Marc's understanding of what the biblical sense of love is in these verses. I agree with his reading of these passages. What I'd like to do instead is examine the role of our emotions in our relationship to God and to each other.

And I want to do that because I suspect that we are often driven as much by our emotions and our passions as by our intellect. I know we like to think of ourselves as 'rational' beings, but, if truth be told, I think we are controlled as much by our gut as by our head.

I think human nature is complicated.

Yes, we can choose to act in certain ways, even when our passions are pushing us to act in other ways. We're not primal beasts controlled by unchecked instincts.

I can choose not to punch the lights out of the guy who has just insulted my mother, a choice that, granted, might be easier if the guy in question is a head taller and fifty pounds of pure muscle heavier than me.

I can choose not to eat that piece of chocolate cake, even though it's screaming out at me and tugging on every sugar- and chocolate- deprived fibre of my being.

Actually ... I can pass on the chocolate cake far more easily than I can pass on the deep-fried fish and chips ...

I can choose ... anything ... in spite of a strong emotional, passionate, push to choose something else.

My / our emotional make-up involves love, but it also involves things like anger, fear, guilt, sadness, desire, hope, compassion, ...

And all of these emotions colour how we relate to God and to each other.

They're legitimate expressions of who we are as humans, and they are legitimately a part of our interactions. Even Marc's description of our relationship to God as being a parent / child relationship can be complicated if our relationship to our parent or parents was / is complicated (as those relationships usually are).

So what does it mean to love God with your whole heart – if that question ultimately means what does it mean to love God within the full range of emotions that make us the human beings we are?

We've been reading the verses from Deuteronomy, Matthew, Mark and Luke to bring focus to this series, because they are not only a clear call for a certain kind of response to God but also, according to Jesus, the very core of what is expected of us.

These scriptures tell us that we need to love God with our whole heart, our whole soul, our whole mind, our whole strength. A simply reading of the verses will probably convince us that we're being asked to love God with everything we have. The fact that the call is broken down into heart, soul, mind and strength can be seen as just a poetic way of emphasising the complete nature of the devotion that's expected of us.

But, of course, they're not the only scriptures that call for, or expect a certain kind of behaviour on our part. There are lots of passages that anticipate an emotional response on our part to the relationship we have with God.

You only have to scroll through the psalms and you will find any number of poems or songs that have a decidedly 'emotional' feel to them, and that call for a decidedly 'emotional' response from us.

The very last psalm, Psalm 50, is a good example of that :

<sup>1</sup> Praise the Lord!  
Praise God in his sanctuary;  
    praise him in his mighty firmament!  
2 Praise him for his mighty deeds;  
    praise him according to his surpassing greatness!  
3 Praise him with trumpet sound;  
    praise him with lute and harp!  
4 Praise him with tambourine and dance;  
    praise him with strings and pipe!  
5 Praise him with clanging cymbals;  
    praise him with loud clashing cymbals!  
6 Let everything that breathes praise the Lord!  
Praise the Lord!

Now, I suppose it's possible to do what this psalm is asking of us without getting particularly fired up. I suppose it's possible to just follow the letter of the psalm and make a lot of noise with tambourines, and cymbals, and trumpets.

Did you notice that we're also enjoined to praise God with pipes?

... Just thought I'd point that out ... If the pipes are good enough for God ...

I suppose it's possible to just go through the motions, even the dancing part, without really entering into the spirit of praise, but I suspect that there is an expectation of joy here.

The psalmist seems to be calling the people to really get into it and let loose their emotions as they praise God.

If we go to the New Testament, we have passages like the one in 1<sup>st</sup> Peter 1: 3-9 :

“3 Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! By his great mercy he has given us a new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, <sup>4</sup>and into an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you, <sup>5</sup>who are being protected by the power of God through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time. <sup>6</sup>In this you rejoice, even if now for a little while you have had to suffer various trials, <sup>7</sup>so that the genuineness of your faith—being more precious than gold that, though perishable, is tested by fire—may be found to result in praise and glory and honour when Jesus Christ is revealed. <sup>8</sup>Although you have not seen him, you love him; and even though you do not see him now, you believe in him and rejoice with an indescribable and glorious joy, <sup>9</sup>for you are receiving the outcome of your faith, the salvation of your souls.”

“... you rejoice with an indescribable and glorious joy ...”

Does that describe your experience of faith?

Are your days coloured by glorious joy as you contemplate the salvation of your soul?

I know that the decision to follow Jesus is an intensely personal one, and one that plays itself out in each of our lives in unique and intensely personal ways.

I know that for some people, following Jesus is just as natural as breathing : we may have grown up in a particular environment, perhaps like MFM, where it was just taken for granted that this was the right thing to do. We may not be able to pinpoint a moment when we consciously ‘decided’ to follow Jesus – it’s just always been a part of who we are, and we are very comfortable in our skin with that as our identity.

But, even if we have always self-identified as ‘Christian’, and that for as long as we can remember, I remain enough of an evangelical to believe that we aren’t Christian by virtue of our birth, or family of origin, but by choice. If we can’t pinpoint the moment when we started following Jesus, I think we nonetheless choose to continue trying to follow Jesus every day.

I also remain enough of an evangelical to believe that this decision, this *on-going* decision, to follow Jesus is one that involves, at the very least, the taking of a

personal inventory; an evaluation of how our choices to date are defining our lives (to ask ourselves what Dr. Phil might ask us : “... so how is that working out for you?”); and a conscious resolve to continue in this path of attempted faithfulness.

For most of us, I think that resolve will also drive us to seek out a community of faith where we feel comfortable; to seek out a group of like-minded persons who share something of our vision for what faithfulness entails; to look for a space where we feel *emotionally* connected, as well as intellectually connected.

We’ve probably all attended church services at some point where the emotional content seemed to dominate the room. The songs, the prayers, the special music – all tailored to bring everyone along in a certain way.

We’ve probably all attended services where the build-up of emotion was almost palpable, where there seemed to be a clear attempt to produce a certain kind of response – a response that would climax at an altar call for a conversion, or a rededication of one’s life; or perhaps climax with a healing of some kind; or perhaps climax at the moment when the offering would be taken up ...

If we’ve attended those kinds of services, and yet ultimately ended up here at MFM, it may be safe to surmise that we may not have been at our most comfortable in that other environment. We may have felt out of step with everyone else, or overwhelmed by the emotion, or worse, we may have felt emotionally manipulated by those leading the service.

And I suppose none of us like to feel like we’re being manipulated, emotionally or otherwise.

Or, if you’ve attended those kinds of services, and yet ultimately ended up here at MFM, you might be asking yourselves “Where’s the energy here? Where’s the passion? Where’s the Spirit? I mean, good grief, they’ve asked a dour scot to be their pastor! Give me a little bit of emotion in my worship!”

Well, if that’s the case, I expect that you’ll *find* emotion, even here at MFM. It’s perhaps more of a Mennonite level of emotion than a Pentecostal level of emotion, but emotion drawn from, or invested in, our relationship with God is not absent here.

We don’t often dance in our circle as we worship God, but we *have* done so.

We like to sing praises to God in four-part harmony, and that has sometimes brought some of us to tears.

We have struggled with each other and with God, and we have argued with each other and with God, and we have prayed with each other – and all of these experiences have been filled with emotion born of a desire to do the right thing as we follow God.

I'm not personally given to ecstatic expressions of joy – when I'm deeply moved by something, even something that makes me profoundly happy, I'm more likely to express it through tears than through dance.

Some of you, I'm sure, are more bubbly than I am in how you experience and how you express your love for God, but I don't think we are any the less similar for all that.

I take it as a given that we are all here this morning because we're trying to understand how best to live out the commandment to love God with our whole heart.

I take it as a given that each one of us brings his or her own particular emotional content, and temperamental tendencies, to what that means.

I know that emotions can be manipulated, consciously or unconsciously, and that churches are not immune from the risks inherent in appealing to emotion, for whatever reason.

But I pray that as we try to fulfill the call to love God with our whole heart, that each of us finds that unique way of being that is truest to their own nature.