

John Docherty, December 20, 2015

Freedom Bound : The path of Love

Love.

It's one of those words we take for granted, isn't it? We know what it means. We use it in any number of ways everyday.

- I love my spouse
- I love my kids
- I love my grandkids
- I love my nieces and nephews
- I love my house
- I love strawberries
- I love canoe camping
- I love the way those big, fat snowflakes just drift down on those windless winter days
- I love walking in the rain
- I love working with wood
- I love pancakes
- I love watching good films
- I love riding a bike

I love any number of things. I'm a regular walking love machine.

Hey, I even love vegetables ... some vegetables ... but I don't love any of them as much as I love ice cream.

My love for vegetables is imperfect. It is not an unconditional love.

My love for ice cream, on the other hand ...

Mint chocolate chip ice cream.

If you could make vegetables taste like mint chocolate chip ice cream, I would love you, too.

But until you *can* make vegetables taste like mint chocolate chip ice cream, I just might reserve judgment on how loveable you are.

There, too, my love is imperfect, conditional.

It's not very Christian of me, I know. We're supposed to love unconditionally. You, like me, are created in God's image, and I'm expected to love you – even if you can't make vegetables taste like mint chocolate chip ice cream.

But you see, the thing is, that I suspect that if you really tried, I mean, *really* tried, you probably *could* make vegetables taste like mint chocolate chip ice cream.

This weekend, these things appeared on our kitchen table. I have no idea where they came from, and, frankly, I'm somewhat perplexed that anyone would think that creating these was a good idea.

They're called "Snapea Crisps", and, according to the packaging, they contain baked, low salt, green pea crisps. They look like, with a little bit more thought and just a sprinkling of imagination, that *they* could have been made to taste like mint chocolate chip ice cream. They've already got the right colour, more or less, minus the chocolate chips.

But they don't taste like mint chocolate chip ice cream.

They taste, instead, like dried out, sort-of salted, pea pod carcasses.

So ... if you choose *not* to make vegetables taste like mint chocolate chip ice cream, I have a legitimate cause for not loving you. Or, at least, I have a legitimate cause for not loving you as much as, say, mint chocolate chip ice cream.

Now, before you get all defensive, let me just say that I *understand* that you may not share my love of mint chocolate chip ice cream.

I understand that your taste in vegetables may lean more towards vanilla, or chocolate, or heavenly hash, or even (although I can't stand the stuff myself) spumoni ice cream.

My embracing of diversity is legendary.

I'm even willing to accept that some of you would prefer vegetables to taste like vegetables.

I'm a big enough man to allow you that quirk.

Especially at this time of year.

It's Christmas!

Of course I'm going to overlook your faults and embrace your fallen humanity.

Of course I'm going to acknowledge that Love, unconditional and free, is what being a Christian at Christmas is all about.

It doesn't matter if you are deliberately ruining my life by refusing to make vegetables taste like mint chocolate chip ice cream – I will love you anyway.

Because, like Hannah in 1st Samuel, and Mary in Luke, I recognize that God is in the process of transforming this world.

With Hannah my heart exults in God; with Mary my soul magnifies the Lord.

I know, like Hannah, that there is no rock like our God; and I know, like Mary, that God has shown strength with his arm.

With Hannah I rejoice that the bows of the mighty are broken but the feeble gird on strength; with Mary I rejoice that God has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly.

With Hannah I can see that those who were full have hired themselves out for bread, but those who were hungry have ceased to hunger; with Mary I can see that God has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty.

I echo with both of these women the hope that what God has done in the past, he will do again.

Though I have to admit – before starting work on this meditation, I hadn't seen the parallels in these passages.

I suppose I'd tended to view Mary's Magnificat as a sort of idealised picture of how the world appeared to this young Jewish woman who was pregnant with a child who would revolutionize life.

The sun was shining, the birds were singing, and all was right with the world.

In some difficult to describe way, I'd read this passage as something of a mystical, abstract, heavenly fait accompli, rather than a testimony of what Jesus' birth really meant in the here and now – because, quite frankly, in the real world of Mary's time, and in the real world of our time, the powerful still occupy their thrones; the hungry still hunger; the proud remain so; and the rich have not been sent away empty.

But Mary's song, like Hannah's, is rather a song of hope. It's not a declaration of what is – it's a declaration of what can be.

A declaration of what *will* be.

God has sometimes, in the past, scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts.

God has sometimes, in the past, brought down the powerful from their thrones and lifted up the lowly.

God has sometimes, in the past, filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty.

And if God has done these things in the past, why wouldn't we expect God to do it again, now and in the future?

Why would we ever assume that just because things are what they are now, that they will always be so?

Why would we assume that the chains that bind us today will always bind us?

And if we are to be the agents of the necessary change, with God's help, why would we assume that just because we love imperfectly, that we are incapable of perfect love?

C. S. Lewis, in his book "The Four Loves" says this at one point : "William Morris wrote a poem called *Love is Enough* and someone is said to have reviewed it briefly in the words "It isn't".

The problem with the sentiment that love is enough, is that we all do love imperfectly. We all have those ways in which our love is measured, conditional.

And yet, we do all love.

Perhaps imperfectly; perhaps conditionally at times; but we do all love.

At the very least, as we seek the freedom promised in Christ, we are on the path of love.

Apart from the Beatles' tune, "All you need is love", that's been going through my head all week, another thought has been bouncing around.

It's a bit of a variation on the theme of the Lord of the Rings.

As you probably know, the trilogy pivots around the ring of power, created by the evil Sauron to control Middle Earth. There were 20 rings in all.

“Three rings for the Elven-kings under the sky,
Seven for the Dwarf-lords in their halls of stone,
Nine for Mortal Men doomed to die,
One for the Dark Lord on his dark throne
In the land of Mordor where the Shadows lie.
One ring to rule them all, One ring to find them,
One ring to bring them all and in the darkness bind them
In the Land of Mordor where the Shadows lie.

The thought that's been bouncing around in my head is tied up with the Leader theme that we've been following this advent.

The idea that we are Freedom bound, but equally bound by those things that diminish our capacity for fully embracing our destiny.

The Leader material suggests that on our road to freedom in Christ we are following the paths of Justice, Trust, Mercy, Love and Service.

The thought that's been running through my head would use this image from the Lord of the Rings to give place of precedence to Love as the path that brings the others together.

We take the path of Justice, because we love.

We take the path of Trust, because we love.

We take the path of Mercy, because we love.

We take the path of Service, because we love.

And yet, I know that my own love is imperfect; it is sometimes, but not always, conditional.

And I know that I sometimes find myself on the paths of Justice, Mercy, Trust or Service, not out of a sense of Love, but out of a sense of duty; of obligation.

Am I right in saying that? That acting out of a sense of duty is not acting out of a sense of Love?

Does duty have its roots in Love?

Lewis' book is an attempt to explore the meaning of Love, and to try to understand the link between our human loves and God's love.

He finishes it with this confession, and I will make it mine as well:

“And with this, where a better book would begin, mine must end. I dare not proceed. God knows, not I, whether I have ever tasted this love. Perhaps I have only imagined the tasting. Those like myself whose imagination far exceeds their obedience are subject to a just penalty; we easily imagine conditions far higher than any we have really reached. If we describe what we have imagined we may make others, and make ourselves, believe that we have really been there. And if I have only imagined it, is it a further delusion that even the imagining has at some moments made all other objects of desire--yes, even peace, even to have no more fears--look like broken toys and faded flowers? Perhaps. Perhaps, for many of us, all experience merely defines, so to speak, the shape of that gap where our love of God ought to be. It is not enough. It is something. If we cannot "practice the presence of God", it is something to practice the absence of God, to become increasingly aware of our unawareness till we feel like men who should stand beside a great cataract and hear no noise, or like a man in a story who looks in a mirror and finds no face there, or a man in a dream who stretches out his hand to visible objects and gets no sensation of touch. To know that one is dreaming is to be no longer perfectly asleep. But for news of the fully waking world you must go to my betters.”