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***“Love God with your whole soul”, September 27, 2015***

I had a Religious Studies Professor whose atheist son asked him why, having studied religion all his life, and having seen the worst of it, he persisted he persisted in believing in God. The professor replied, in his inimitable way:

“Well, son, on one hand, you have the universe, the physical world, your what-have-you. And on the other hand, you've got dancing. And in between.... there is all of this!!!!”

Now, I would forgive you for not finding this particular argument for the existence of God convincing. You are Mennonites, after all. And bless our Mennonite hearts, we have traditionally overlooked the evidentiary value of dancing - any value of dancing. But if it did resonate with you, then I think it might be because it speaks to loving God with all of your soul.

So we started this series by asking ourselves the question: What does it mean to love the Lord your God with all of your mind, your heart and your soul.

Marc Paré, I think, did the mind aspect justice by entreating us to a historical biblical exegesis on what it means, exactly, to love. He warned us against conflating modern understandings of especially romantic love with the Biblical command to Love God and neighbour.

His sermon really resonated with me because I find that I am growing increasingly convinced that the contemporary ideal of romantic love has become the de facto Western civic “religion”. If we observe the sociologist Rudolph Otto's influential definition of religion as the “object of ultimate concern”, then this becomes all the more palpably convincing. With Hollywood supplying the sacred texts, Top 40 Radio blasting the sacred hymns and the science of psychology being chief apologist laying out elaborate philosophical groundwork attesting to the validity of its central gospel: that the goal of life is to be happy, and actualize yourself. And Yay, hear ye all the good news: there is someone out there whom you are destined for, in whom you may find ultimate fulfillment. And by your powers, this union can be obtained! And yes, love is something that happens to you, that you “fall into”, as Marc observed, but there are parameters that are within your control. By making yourself as physically attractive and socially well situated as possible, you may be more poised to enable that magic of entwining yourself with another of comparable aesthetic and social value. And you may thereby regale in the

satisfaction of mutual attraction, commitment and dependence in what the French and what the pretentious English call an “egoism à deux”.

Part of the appeal of this civic religion, as I am accusing it of being, is that it appeals to this dimension of the mind. Indeed, as some of you who are teenagers can attest, and as the rest of us who were teenagers can probably remember all too vividly: we seem biologically primed to confess to the creed of the romantic. Our very hormones impel us to validate the romantic imperative of finding and holding on to “the one”. Love, heart. Love heart. Love Heart. Love.

Which brings us to loving God with all of one's heart.

I take it that John discussed this last week. Unfortunately, I was not here because my heart was busy pumping oxygen to very sore legs that were probably taking me from kilometres 32-40 out of 42 during the Montreal Marathon last week.

We are impelled to love God with all of our mind, and all of our heart and all of our soul because all three of these aspects are crucial. If you are picturing a stool with three legs, you are along the right track.

Erring too much on loving God with your mind at the expense of heart and soul places you at risk of having an overly intellectual relationship with God. One example of this tendency, I suggest, is dogmatic fundamentalisms. If you love the Lord your God with all your mind, but do not equally invest with your heart and soul, you are building the foundation of your faith in shifty sands indeed! For the human mind is fickle, and craves certainty. And yet it is prone to error. Perhaps even all the more banal is that loving God with all your mind, while leaving off the emotional and what I will call the spiritual component, has led to a dry, ‘yeastless’ love of God, which tends to slowly die.

Real talk now: The New York times reported a few years ago that the religious left in the West has been in precipitous decline in the last century, with no signs of abating. This article notes that groups such as the Doukhobours, Reform Jews, Quakers, Anglicans and other groups have been dying out, which confirms my worst fears. I believe nobly and with good intentions, many liberal Christians have been rightly sensitive to the myriad criticisms of religion and have sought to rectify such problems with the corrective of emphasizing the importance of the mind in a right relationship with God. Reason, they proclaimed, is needed to guide and nurture faith, and the two must not stand in opposition. At peril of oversimplifying a complex social phenomenon, I would suggest that the shirking of the religious

left, a gradual erosion of faith not into doubt but into non-faith, can be described as a failure to love God with all of your heart and soul.

Let's leave the liberals alone for a moment and turn to conservative Christians.

The basic disagreement between Baptists and groups who used to self-identify as "Christian Fundamentalists" (now they usually identify as "non-denominational" and are identified pejoratively as "fundamentalists") and the Pentecostals, it seems to me, can be fruitfully understood as a tension between relying on loving God with your Mind versus loving God with your Heart. The "fundamentalists" accused these 20<sup>th</sup> century Pentecostal upstarts of placing too much authority on one's subjective experience of the divine. How can these charismatic Christians know, the fundamentalists argued, whether their ecstatic, emotively charged, dramatic religious experiences of being struck down with the Holy Spirit or of speaking in tongues ... how do you know, they have argued, whether these experiences stem from the author of the universe, or your own fallen and very fallible ego; indeed, from Satan himself? Much better, they argue, to found your faith in the unfailing Word of God as given by inerrant scripture.

But, Pentecostals have traditionally maintained, however inerrant scripture may be, our minds no less than our emotions are parochial and fallen, and fallible, and so, therefore, may be our interpretations of scripture.

I don't know about you, but it seems to me that each side has a good point.

Brace yourselves for Thomas' mandatory comparative religion moment, because I find a look at other Faith traditions can sometimes be very illustrative, such as this case right here.

In the 16<sup>th</sup> Century, when Europe was undergoing religious foment, and Luther and Calvin were rallying cries of "sola fide" and "sola scriptura" against the pope, and our founding Anabaptist fathers and mothers were radically and very dangerously against the reformationists for not being sufficiently "sola scriptura", in a very different part of the world, at the same time, there was a reformist movement in Hinduism called the Bakhti movement, which are the historical antecedents to Hindu branches that have thrived to this very day, including the Caitanya movement, of which contemporary Hare Krishnas are a famous example. The Bakhti movement was a devotional movement, and argued that Salvation could be obtained not only through Jnana, or what Hindus might call "sacred knowledge", but Salvation could be obtained also by their practice of radical devotion. Love

with all your heart! For these Bakhti practitioners, it did not much matter whom was the object of the devotion: Hinduism has been described as the religion of 10001 Million gods, and any one of the them was a suitable object of devotion. Even one's husband was thought of as a noble object of devotion during this period. And before you ask: notably, the practice of total devotion to one's wife never really caught on. Curious.

One of the ostensible advantages of radical devotion with all of your heart, Bakhti Hindus proclaimed, is that it effectively obviates the ego. Loving with your all your heart means giving your everything for the sake of your beloved, holding nothing back. It has analogues with God's sacrificial love for us Christians: For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son. There is something profoundly and touchingly humble about sacrificial love.

But even sacrificial love, unguided by proper intellectual, and what I will call spiritual, dimensions, can have very negative manifestations. In the Bakhti tradition, for example, we saw a revival of the extirpated Hindu practice of Sati: namely widows throwing themselves on their dead husbands' cremation pyres at their husbands' funerals, effectively burning themselves to death. Can you imagine throwing yourself into a fire! It makes Romeo and Juliette's reaction to each other's deaths seem measured and moderate. And darkly, it led to a climate in which pressure was placed on "good Bakhti Hindu women" to prove their devotion to their husbands, and failure to commit "sati" was regarded as embarrassing to the family and disrespectful to the husband. Thanks in large part to the activism of Gandhi and many other enlightened Hindus on this issue, Sati has been made illegal in India, and is increasingly viewed with appropriate horror and censure. But the practice continues in some circles, as do abuses of this practice in which the widow is murderously "helped" along to ensure the deceased husband's honour.

Lest we get too comfortable pointing fingers here, let me assure you that we find equally horrific examples of sacrificial love gone horribly awry. One word: Jonestown. Maybe you still feel a comfortable distance from Jonestown: that was not Christianity, you say, that was a cult. As a scholar of religion, I feel the need to remind you that Jonestown was far from an isolated outlier in the history of Christianity. The followers of Jesus, in every century, have formed Messianic death cults marked by mass suicides and comparable atrocities. Does the Munster Rebellion ring a bell for anyone here? In this episode, not the proudest in Anabaptist history, disciples of the respected Anabaptist Melchior Hoffman, Jan Matthys and Jon of Leiden led this rebellion, which sought to establish an Anabaptist Utopia in Germany. In doing so, they departed from Hoffman's

pacifistic teachings and, raising an army of radical Anabaptists, took the city of Munster by force. It can be tricky to parse the truth of the historical record, because Catholics and Lutherans were spreading so much propaganda against all Anabaptists, particularly violent ones, but suffice to say that even in the more forgiving historical accounts, granting many grains of salt in their favour, these guys do not come off looking much better than David Khoresh, and this group is not much better than Jonestown Pentecostals, or Waco Branch Davidians. It seems pretty clear that they committed mass civilian murders, forced sharing of belongings in a sick parody of early Church communal sharing of belongings, which for them included wives. Women who refused to be forced into “marriage” and shared were allegedly beheaded. Eventually, mad with power, Matthys met his end leading an army of 30 against an army of thousands outside of the city gate. Matthys was convinced God would send his angels and grant him Victory. Spoiler alert: God did not.

How about Claas Epp? Seized with millennial fervour, convinced that God had revealed to him the date of the apocalypse, which was supposed to be 1891 (Spoiler alert.....), Epp convinced, and led, 600 Russian Mennonites into a freezing, hostile, tiger and wild dog ridden Turkestan to establish a new Jerusalem. While not as dramatic, about a quarter of the followers perished in suicides or from the perils of the journey and new settlement, and the rest gradually grew disillusioned leaving Epp to die old and alone in Turkestan in the 1920s.

So: as John posited last week: emotions are liable to being misled. Perhaps all of these poor souls did love God with all their heart. But I submit to you: they should have known better. They were not loving God with enough of their minds. And moreover, they were not loving God with all their souls.

What on earth does it mean to love God with all of one's soul? Back in Biblical days, it made sense to believe in the soul. How else to explain what property gives life; what animates the body? Indeed, the Greek word for soul is animus, from which is derived the Latin “anima”, which constitutes the etymology of so many English and French and Spanish words like, animal, animate. In the reading from Genesis, we know that God breathes life, into Adam, the Hebrew word is “ruah”, which, as in the Greek Animus, the same word is shared for Soul and breath. From our earliest times as a people of Faith in God, we understood the soul as that which gives life, it is the seat of our most essential being.

Later, with the Enlightenment, we began to discover the role of the brain in animating the body. Far from ready to abandon the notion of the soul, but at his

wit's end to account for its interrelated role in animating the body, Descartes theorized that the pituitary gland was the junction of the soul and the body, the site where the physical converged with the metaphysical. These days, cognitive scientists no longer feel beholden to a theory of the soul to explain the human mind, and the notion is being increasingly abandoned.

This becomes frustrating for our purposes, here now this morning at MFM. Because if there is no soul, or there is one maybe but we don't know what it is or what it does, then what are we to do with Jesus' injunction to us to Love God and neighbour with all of it? Even silly scientists can work with “Love with all of your heat and your mind”, but how do you even love with your soul?

I think that a look to the great Christian Mystics here can be illustrative.

For better and, I think, often for worse, we Mennonites have tended to have a relatively narrow historical vision, at least as far as the history of Christianity is concerned. Believing that the Bible is inspired, we know our first century history pretty well. And Mennonites are fond of telling other Christians that we know that the early Church was pacifistic. But by the 4<sup>th</sup> Century, when Christianity goes mainstream and become the State religion of Rome under emperor Constantine (which requires it to all but abandon its Pacifist teachings) Church history tends to be suspect, as far as Mennonites are concerned, until the Anabaptist movement emerges in the 16<sup>th</sup> Century. But everything in between, Mennonites have not had much use for. We don't talk too much about the Saints, not the official ones canonized by Catholic popes, at least. And this can be sad, because I think that many of the Saints were excellent exemplars of sort of radical Faith which the great Anabaptist leaders called for.

For example, Francis of Assisi in the 13<sup>th</sup> Century, of whom the Franciscan order of Priests was named. Or the Spanish St John of the Cross and Theresa of Avila in the sixteenth century, who founded the Carmelite order of friars in the Roman Catholic church. The Carmelites were famous for their mystical approach to loving God.

As we heard in the poem “Ascent to Mount Carmel” that was read this morning, there is a significant emotional component to the Mystic's love of God. As with the Psalmist, the language used to describe God is the stuff of romantic love poetry. The analogy of lovers burning with passion to be united is used to describe the profound YEARNING for feeling the presence of God. Mystics in the Christian tradition going as far back as the 3<sup>rd</sup> Century with the so called Desert Fathers,

like Anthony the Great, perhaps the first Christian hermit, credited with founding Christian monasticism in the 3<sup>rd</sup> Century, have elaborated the mystical approach to loving God.

The best, most famous, Mystics, I believe, are famous precisely for Loving God with all of their minds and all of their hearts, yes, but especially also for so evocatively loving God with all their soul or spirit.

What is the mystical experience of God? I have neither the time, nor the inclination, nor certainly the words, to explain it here. Indeed, in their experiences of God, Mystics almost always insist profoundly on the **ineffable** character of the experience, which may be one reason that allegory is popular with them. But words can help us to some extent in our understanding, and I will do my best.

Just as the mind, emotions and soul are interconnected but are separate concepts, but interconnected, so are their different characters to what it means to love God with each. The mystic experience is an extreme example, I suggest, of loving God with one's soul. It certainly has affective, emotional aspects to it, hence the love imagery in the poetry. Indeed, in my own admitted admiration for the Mystics, I would point to many of them as exemplars not only of Loving God with all of one's soul, but also with all of one's mind and heart. But let's focus on the aspect of the soul.

One of the benefits of the mystical focus on the soul is that it tends to engender profound humility. The great scholar of religion, and also Lutheran Theologian, Rudolph Otto was interested in explaining religious experience. In comparing different religions and cultures, he believed that the quintessential religious experience, that which sets religious experiences apart from all other ones is that of the **numinous**. In his most famous work, "the Idea of the Holy", Otto explained the numinous as a "non-rational, non-sensory experience or feeling whose primary and immediate object is outside the self". Otto goes on to describe the response to the numinous as "Mysterium Tremendum". In an authentic experience of God's presence, one is seemingly paradoxically impressed with God's great power and might, but one is also at the same time made to feel profoundly small. There is a tension here between the incredibly inspiring feeling of ultimate significance, but also the simultaneous experience of relative insignificance in relation to this great mystery. In comparison with the awesome character of God's limitless love, we are terrified, yes terrified by our parochial, fallen, ever so limited love.

We Mennonites sometimes shy away from the language of Fear of God, with it's

facile associations with a Warrior God, a God who sometimes smites folks, who sometimes impels his people to do the smiting. The God we Mennonites sometimes, I think a little smugly, refer to as the “Old Testament God”. But sufficient attention to loving God with all of your soul, which can bring about experience of what Otto called “the numinous”, reminds us that fear of God is not irreconcilable and in fact entirely consistent with the perfect, Non-Violent love of Christ.

Otto was especially interested in Mystics like St. John of the Cross (John, are we allowed to call him a Saint in a Mennonite Church?), because they sought out this kind of encounter with God, they specialized in it. In the writings of the Mystic is the ambivalent character of the mystical experience given its most articulate expression.

It is sometimes said that profound mystical experiences of God have the power to help us transcend our ego. This has all sorts of potentially positive ethical aspects, sure. But there are also costs to it. John of the Cross coined the phenomenon of the “Dark Night of the Soul”, which has since become official Roman Catholic doctrine. This too is difficult to do justice, even in an over-bloated sermon. Suffice to say that after such a peak religious experience of the “numinous” such as the ones reported by Mystics, after such a profound sense of presence of God, the ordinariness of everyday life for many Mystics becomes a great travail. Because we are humans still living here on Earth, and are separated from God, even the greatest Christian Mystics have not been able to sustain such peak experiences of the numinous, of such intense feelings of God's presence. And the contrast of not feeling the presence of God, or perhaps not experiencing it in that same way is the Dark Night of the Soul. While St John of the Cross and Theresa of Avilla wrote eloquently about the importance of enduring the Dark Night of the Soul in order to foster spiritual maturity, and while they believe that imparts patience and wisdom and fosters humility and openness to mystery, there can be no doubt that it can be experienced as harrowing. In the posthumously released letters of Mother Theresa to her confessor, it was revealed that after formative spiritual highs of adolescence, Mother Theresa experienced a prolonged Dark Night of the Soul as agonizing, lasting most of her life and only sparsely peppered with periods of relief.

The Mystical experience of God, which I take to be an extreme version of loving with all of one's soul illustrates two important and interrelated spiritual characteristics: humility and an openness to mystery. I believe that such humility and openness to mystery can serve as important correctives in our approach to loving God to the haughty tendency towards pride of the mind.



In the broader Church, sometimes mysticism has been viewed with suspicion. The yearning for union with God, some Christian thinkers have argued, gets uncomfortably close to a blasphemous assimilation with God. And talk of the sublimation of the ego sounds like the stuff of Eastern religions. Indeed, since Anthony in the 3<sup>rd</sup> Century, some Christian critics have pointed out that in worship style, in the sort of language used to describe the mystical experience and in a lifestyle marked by a preference for solitude and radical peace seeking, the Christian mystics are remarkably similar to mystics of other, non-Christian religions. And it is true: the poem "The ascent to mount Carmel" and the kinds of radical transformative experiences described by St John of the Cross have striking corollaries with those of Sufi Muslim mystics, and also Hindu, Sikh and Buddhist mystics, the latter of whom have a conception of God so radically different that they are sometimes, with some good reason, though perhaps over-simplistically described as atheistic.

To me as a scholar of religion who is also religious himself, I have always felt a certain bemusement when I read about this "accusation" against the Christian mystics. Far from feeling disquiet, on the contrary, I have always felt **comforted** by the striking **universality** of the so called mystical experience across religious traditions. I wonder if it ever occurred to some of these Christian thinkers who have it out for the mystics (these guys are probably really good at loving God with all of their minds but maybe are lagging in the loving God with all of your heart and soul department), in their dogmatic arrogance that maybe, just maybe, **the explanation for the striking resemblance of descriptions of mystical experiences across disparate ages and cultures and faith traditions, is... wait for it... the objective existence of God and a singularly human capacity of experiencing love of God on this deep, spiritual level.**

Now, to be clear, I am not suggesting that all Mennonites should seek the lofty goal of becoming mystics. It would be both unfeasible and impractical if everyone became hermits. For this reason, amongst others, Roman Catholics have held their Mystics up as sort of super spiritually muscular elites. They are a band of specialists. The institutionalization of which, however, has been foreign, perhaps even antithetical to us Mennonites. In our historic emphasis on community living, on liturgical egalitarianism, priesthood of all believers and all that: we don't believe in outsourcing religious experiences or roles. This is one of our strengths, certainly.

I came from a mainline Protestant tradition, the United Church, in which, like most Catholics and Protestants, Sunday mornings are marked by the conspicuous

presence in Church of a choir, who belt out hymns to the rest of us congregants: congregants who are at times sitting down, at other times standing up, usually, comically it has always struck me, monotonously droning along with the choir very self-consciously, lest our dour din detract from the luster of the majestic blast of organ and operatic choral polyphony. I will never forget my total shock at my first Mennonite service at Valleyview Mennonite Church in my hometown of London Ontario, when I was hearing, for the first time in Stereo, four and sometimes eight part harmony. And though not every Mennonite could sing, I will tell you what : the entire congregation could give that fancy choir of Metropolitan United Church, with its semi-professional paid choir a run for its money. And compared to Met United's congregation as a whole? No contest. As John alluded to last week, our communal and egalitarian 4 part harmony choral tradition is great indeed, and often impressive to non-Mennonites. We are deservedly proud of our egalitarian and communal character. But, I think it behooves us, in all modesty, to recognize that our way has trade-offs. And you don't have to be a mystic to have an experience of the numinous.

In our emphasis upon the collective, we have sometimes not made much room for the spiritual aspects of solitude. In our emphasis on discipleship and right living, perhaps we could do well to attend more to the inner, contemplative aspects of faith life. And in seeking to Love God with all of our hearts and minds and souls and strength, we should seek to deeply experience God's love. And allow ourselves to be guided by humility and mystery. I think Jesus commands us to Love God with all our Mind and Heart and Soul because reason, and emotion and joy, and humility and openness to mystery are all mutually corrective mechanisms that light the way along Christ's path.

I implore you to not forget your very private, very mysterious spiritual dimension in your liturgical and ethical approach to God. Do not forget the ontological, experiential aspects of faith life. Mennonite, tend to the soul. You need it for dancing.

Can I have an Amen?