

GOD AND THE L-WORD

Psalm 36:5-12, Ephesians 2.1-9, John 15:9-17

It's a four-letter word, beginning with L.

Yesterday was Valentine's Day—the day of the L-Word: all over the world, in countless different ways, people were saying to each other, *I love you*. Sometimes the L-word is spoken carelessly, casually, thoughtlessly. Sometimes it rises up from the deepest levels of who we are and speaks the most important truth about what matters most in our lives. Did you speak the L-Word to someone special yesterday? What kind of response were you looking for? What kind of response did you get? Did you perhaps forget what day it was? Or are you someone who just can't feel comfortable with the L-Word—maybe it's too mushy, too sentimental, too romantic for you?

Maybe you're like the fellow who remembered late one afternoon that it was Valentine's Day and realized that he had not bought a card or a present for his wife. So he left work early, went by the florist, stopped at the candy store, went home, rang the bell... When she opened the door, he handed her the roses and the candy and shouted out, "Mary, darling, *I love you!*" And immediately she burst into tears, weeping uncontrollably, almost hysterically. As you might imagine, John was totally baffled by this unexpected response. When he finally got her to quit crying, he asked the main question that men ask women, "*Honey, what's wrong?*" "Oh, John," she said, this has been such a perfectly dreadful day. The phone has been ringing nonstop, the baby won't quit crying, the vacuum is broken, the roast has burned—*and now you come home drunk.*"

Not just in early February, but with every chance we get, we Christians celebrate the L-Word, because the heart of the Gospel is God's Valentine to your heart and mine—a love letter addressed to the heart of the world—from the heart of the God whose nature and whose name is Love.

But the L-word takes a lot of abuse, doesn't it? It's a classic victim of our tendency to debase words and use them not to clarify or communicate but to confuse and deceive. The words, "I love you," can easily cloak something darker: often when we say "I love you," what we really mean is something more like "I want you—I want to control you; I want to possess you; I want to use you for my own purposes." And whenever that happens, something precious is lost, because the words we use to get some clarity about our lives stop being windows into the soul and become instead masks behind which we hide from each other and from God.

At Hendrix College I teach not only Religion but also Latin and Greek. I'm glad to be a teacher of languages because I'm absolutely

convinced that language—speech, words, grammar, syntax—is fundamental to what it means to be human, to be created in the image of the God whose name is *the Word*—the Word that became flesh and dwelt among us.

We just can't be too careful about the way we handle the words with which we express ourselves and try to make sense of our lives. Words are the raw materials of our lives. *Words matter*: the words we speak to God, to each other, to ourselves—the Word by which God called the world into the existence, the Word of redemption that God speaks to us in Christ. *Words matter*. So we'd better be careful about misusing language and mangling words.

One of the basic tactics of every tyrant is to get control of the language—to redefine its terms in ways that fit his own cynical purposes. Words like democracy and freedom get turned upside down. As Senator Huey Long once said, "One day we'll have fascism in this country; *we just won't call it that*." Over the past century or so, the words freedom and democracy have been used to describe the exact opposite of what these words originally meant? A slave state like North Korea somehow gets away with calling itself a "*Democratic People's Republic...*"

But you don't have to go all the way to Asia to find examples of what I'm talking about. Some years ago our own government began building the MX missile, the most destructive implement of offensive warfare ever to roll off an assembly line. Guess what we called it? "*The Peacekeeper*." And more than once in recent years we've seen people who bomb women's clinics and murder doctors, but who call themselves—you guessed it—"pro-life."

There are some words to which we have not been kind—good words, helpful words, beautiful words that we have twisted into something unrecognizable. Look what we've done to the L-Word. We've turned it into another term for the exact opposite of what it truly means; we've turned the word "love" into a camouflage for the demonic desire to possess, to dominate someone else. That's how we get to the place where all too many of us will know how to identify with the one who said, "*All we need is love. All we get is sex*." We need to reclaim the L-Word. We've got to get serious about showing the world what the word "love" really means.

And there's *another L-word* that has been damaged almost beyond repair. It's a word that means "generous," "open-handed," "open-minded," "tender-hearted"—or at least that's what it used to mean. In its original definition, "*liberal*" meant the opposite of "stingy and

mean-spirited.” But a strange thing has happened over the past 20 years or so. Somehow we have managed to turn this wonderful L-word into a slur, a slander, an insult. Never mind that “liberal” comes from the same Latin root that gives us the word “liberty”! Some of us have gotten into the habit of using the word liberal as a quick way to dismiss anyone who disagrees with us, or any idea that calls into question any of our assumptions about life.

But wait a minute! The English word *liberal* come from a Latin word that means *free*. If a liberal is someone who works to make people free and bestows the gifts of life freely, I suggest to you that the ultimate liberal is the God of the Bible. For God’s gifts are given freely, generously, extravagantly—yes, *liberally*. God is not stingy. God is not concerned above all with holding on to what he’s got or preserving the status quo! A quickness to forgive, to accept, to believe the best is one hallmark of a liberal spirit, and by that standard, too, *God is the ultimate liberal*.

What kind of God is portrayed in the picture of the father in the parable of the Prodigal Son? When the undeserving young rascal makes his way back to his father’s house, the old man does not subject him to the third degree or make him stand outside barefoot for three days. Without waiting for the boy to prove his worthiness, or even his sincerity, the father simply accepts him—gladly, freely, extravagantly, *liberally*. And he throws a party to celebrate! And you can bet the father doesn’t cut corners to hold down expenses or balance the budget! Jesus implies that this is what God is like—only more so: God is totally generous, lavishing an abundance of free gifts on those who don’t deserve his love. *God is the ultimate liberal*.

What about attitudes toward *change*? If the conservative instinctively resists change—clinging to the past and trying to keep things pretty much the way they are right now—the liberal tends to seek a new world in which things will be better than they are now or ever have been in the past. By that standard, too, God is a liberal: the God of the Bible is never willing to rest content with the way things used to be—or the ways things are now. The God of Israel—the God of Jesus—is always on the move, always upsetting the apple cart, always subversive of every establishment, always moving toward a new future, a Kingdom of justice and peace that is so unlike anything that is or has been that we can only dimly imagine it. *The status quo has never faced a more serious challenge than that!*

God is a radical. God is a subversive. God is indeed a liberal.

Of course, one charge against the liberals is that they think there is such a thing as a free lunch in this world. Liberals, we're told, have a hard time realizing that "*you don't get something for nothing.*" I realize that in this fallen world, there is a huge grain of truth in the view that "*you don't get something for nothing.*" Hard work and diligent effort are a big part of what makes for a successful life. And if liberals in the political arena have forgotten that reality, then part of the discredit into which liberalism has fallen is something that liberals have brought upon themselves. *But even in this world, it's just not true that you can't get something for nothing!* There are lots of things that you receive freely, as a gift rather than as a reward. When you were conceived and born, it wasn't because of some price you had paid. When you awoke this morning and your heart was still beating, when you opened your eyes and saw that the sun had risen in the East again, when you filled your lungs with God's free air, all of these things were absolute gifts to you, completely free, utterly without price. *Even in this fallen world,* it isn't always true that you can't get something for nothing. The most important things in life turn out to be gifts, rather than things that we have earned by our own efforts. That's because *God's liberalism* is manifest in the way this world operates, even in its fallen state. God's liberal, lavish generosity is so powerful that not even our sin can abolish it from this world. And if St. Paul's doctrine of salvation by grace alone means anything at all, surely it means that God's love and forgiveness are offered freely, lavishly, liberally—literally for nothing. Eternal life is something you get for nothing! Indeed, that's the only way you get it! "By grace you have been saved through faith, and even that is not of yourselves; it is not by works, lest anyone should boast" (Ephesians 2.8-9). *New life in Christ is received freely, "for nothing," or it is not received at all.*

"Nothing in my hand I bring; simply to thy cross I cling."

So hear and believe the Gospel of the L-Word: God's liberal love liberates us from our sinful clinging to what is past, empowering us to become co-liberators with God in the redemption of the world here and now, and for a new future beyond all our accomplishments, beyond all our wildest dreams. If today you have really heard and responded to that gloriously good news, from somewhere in your heart will arise a hymn of praise: All praise and thanks to God whose nature, whose name, is a four-letter word beginning with an L.

All praise and thanks to God, whose name, whose nature is Love.
Amen.