

Loving without strings attached

“Love believes all things hopes all things and endures all things.”
St Paul

I believe that unarmed truth and unconditional love will have the final word in reality. That is why right, temporarily defeated, is stronger than evil triumphant.

Martin Luther King JNR.

One of the leading values of The New Testament is unconditional love or love without strings attached. There is no doubt in my mind that loving like this is one of the hardest things to do in life.

If you are a normal mother of a newborn child, I think that you will understand unconditional love as the essence of the bond between you and your child. At this stage a child can give nothing back and demands all, but that is alright somehow. After the long months of anticipation, the moment of holding that little life in ones' arms can be one of the most sacred moments of a lifetime. The umbilical cord is gone. There are no strings attached and yet due to unconditional love the child thrives!

However, as that child gets older the unconditional love may get strained out of the relationship and be replaced with a very conditional kind of loving, based on keeping the room tidy, getting good grades in school, doing chores and pulling one's weight in the family. And if these things are not done the relationship, once so loving, gets more difficult and sometimes almost impossible as the teenager leaves home or runs away, or gets into drugs and ends up on the street.

What kind of love did Jesus teach as the highest form? He answered this question in the parable of the prodigal son. The

parable is about a selfish boy who runs away from home and spends his inheritance on wine women and song. His elder brother has no time for him when he gets back home because the love he has is conditional, based on performance. The prodigal is a dull failure in that regard and the elder brother has no time for him.

But the father in the story is a figure for God, who Jesus teaches is a great Someone who brings his rain on the just and the unjust. Jesus makes it clear that the father in the parable loves like God-unconditionally. When the son returns home destitute, the father throws a party and puts the robe of honor on his son, even giving him his own ring of authority. Critics of this kind of thinking would say that this is rewarding bad behaviour...an argument Israel uses against the idea of a ceasefire...

But what is Jesus' point? God loves us all unconditionally, no matter what we have done. We are to love like God as best we can, not like the elder brother.

But you say to me, "Hold it a moment! I identify with the elder brother! How can I love someone who has hurt me? I just can't do that. How can you love someone unconditionally who has murdered someone? How can you unconditionally love someone who has been charged with a felony or been convicted of armed robbery? These people belong in jail. You cannot extend unconditional love to them! That will not work!

And what about at Family celebrations like weddings or funerals, when we have to see that relative that no one in our family can stand, am I supposed to love them when they are so bitter and hard to be around?? And at work when I have to be in the same room as that co-worker who betrayed me! I can't stand his phony smile. I can't deal with her manipulation! And here's the kicker, I can't even love myself unconditionally. I get so mad at myself when I screw up, it takes weeks to forgive myself. I go around feeling

guilty all the time and I ought to feel guilty because I doubt I will ever change.”

Now it is true that some of us do get damaged by life. Some of us had very rough childhoods and what went on in our homes was not pretty.

Dr. Phil tells the story of a very attractive woman who was molested by her grandfather as a child and then later repeatedly raped. When she met Dr. Phil she was 50 years old and 30 years into a marriage. She confided to Dr. Phil that she was ‘dirty and damaged and unworthy of her husband.’ This strikingly beautiful woman when she looked in the mirror saw nothing but trash. She hated her body and was filled with self loathing. Physical and emotional intimacy had been virtually impossible for her in her marriage. Her grandfather’s hold had been so strong upon her that being around any man could bring back all those strong emotions. The threat of closeness by her husband would cause her to shake and vomit.

But her husband was a saint and he had unending patience and **unconditional love for her**. But Jennie could hardly bear to confront the problem because it hurt too much. As a child she had tried to tell her mother what was happening, but her mother would have none of it. She told Jennie that she was having ‘dirty thoughts’ about her ‘loving’ grandfather. Scared, alone with nowhere to turn, Jennie suffered in silent shame.

But interestingly over the years, Jennie developed a strong social mask. She became the rock that people turned to in difficult times. She could not reveal to the world that she was a wounded healer. After therapy and many conversations with Dr Phil he asked her the following series of questions:

“What if you deserved better then, and deserve now so much better? What if you are wrong and it is not your fault? What if it is

not too late? What if change is there for the taking? What if I could tell you right here and now what you had to do to be free; Would you do it, no matter how scary or threatening?”

Jennie thought that maybe, just maybe, she could, and so Dr Phil asked her one last all important question: **“Are you sick to death of this, sick to the point that you will stand up for yourself right now and declare your right to a better life, no matter who you have to face?”**

Jennie trembled and sobbed, the tears streaming down her face but she looked at Dr Phil squarely for the first time and said: “Yes, if this is my time, if its my turn, then I want it and I want it right now.”

Unbeknownst to Jennie Dr Phil had dressed up a recruited volunteer who matched the physical description of her grandfather. The man was now standing directly behind her. Dr Phil then said “If you are sick of this, if you are unwilling to be a prisoner for another minute then you tell him right now what he did to you.” And without warning her turned her around.

Jennie erupted with an incredible barrage. Thirty years of pain, hatred and emotions were suddenly released as she told him what she thought of him, no holds barred. She finished with “Do you hear me? It is not me. I am a good clean woman.”

Finally, she had placed the responsibility where it belonged.

But then Jennie suddenly added something that Dr Phil had not expected. She turned to the man and forgave him, and in doing so she broke her own chains that had bound her to her grandfather...

That encounter took place ten years before Jennie once again contacted Dr Phil, and then he got the end of her story. Her husband had gotten terribly ill and had died only days before

Jennie called Dr. Phil. Alone in the hospital room, the two of them exchanged what they knew would be their last heartfelt words. Jennie promised her husband that she would call Dr. Phil and thank him. In those last intimate moments her husband said to Jennie: **“Thank-you for having the courage to walk out of your cold dark place and into my arms and heart. The last ten years we shared together were worth the thirty years of waiting.”**

I think that this story from Dr. Phil about Jennie is in accord with where we are to start. The Bible talks about ‘loving God with all our heart and mind and strength **and our neighbor as ourselves.**’ Jesus added that we were to be good to those who spitefully use us.

To begin that process, we must start with ourselves. If we genuinely do that, we will one day be able to extend love even to our enemies.

Alan Cohen writes: *Ultimately, we must let go of our erroneous perceptions about our identity. All of our problems stem from our loss of the memory of our true nature, which is love. We are lovable and we are loving. But we have forgotten this great truth and have become hypnotized by the doubts that sap the creative life force from our life stream. We may believe that we are dark, selfish and evil. None of this is true. **We are the light.***

If we were right about our guilt, there would be no God, love would be meaningless and the world would be doomed... But none of that is so.

As St Paul once said in Athens, we are all sons and daughters of God. Since God is Love, Love **has** to have the last word in this world and universe.

Why don't we get on the train of unconditional love and stay on it for the rest of our lives?

Out of all the trains in the station, it is the only one which can take us Home.