



THE CONGREGATIONAL CHURCH OF NEW CANAAN

SERMON – November 4, 2007

Priming the Pump

(Part I: The Virtuous Circle)

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John 13:34-35

³⁴I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. ³⁵By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, **if you have love for one another.**'

John 14:15-21

15 "If you love me, you will keep my commandments. ¹⁶ And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate, to be with you forever. ¹⁷ This is the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees him nor knows him. You know him, because he abides with you, and he will be in you.

¹⁸ "I will not leave you orphaned; I am coming to you. ¹⁹ In a little while the world will no longer see me, but you will see me; because I live, you also will live. ²⁰ On that day you will know that I am in my Father, and you in me, and I in you. **21 They who have my commandments and keep them are those who love me; and those who love me will be loved by my Father, and I will love them and reveal myself to them."**

John 15:9-12

⁹ As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love. ¹⁰ **If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commandments and abide in his love.** ¹¹ I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete. ¹² **"This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you.**

1 John 4:13-21

¹³ By this we know that we abide in him and he in us, because he has given us of his Spirit. ¹⁴ And we have seen and do testify that the Father has sent his Son as the Savior of the world. ¹⁵ God abides in those who confess that Jesus is the Son of God, and they abide in God. ¹⁶ So we have known and believe the love that God has for us.

God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them. ¹⁷ Love has been perfected among us in this: that we may have boldness on the day of judgment, because as he is, so are we in this world. ¹⁸ There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear; for fear has to do with punishment, and whoever fears has not reached perfection in love. ¹⁹ We love because he first loved us. ²⁰ Those who say, "I love God," and hate their brothers or sisters, are liars; for those who do not love a brother or sister whom they have seen, cannot love God whom they have not seen. ²¹ The commandment we have from him is this: those who love God must love their brothers and sisters also.

One of the bucolic charms of our Maryland farm was the well water. No more city chemicals, we had our own fresh, cold well water. But as we learned quickly enough, there is a catch to every bucolic charm, and the catch to well water was the electric pump.

Now the pump was pretty reliable as farm house pumps go. Day after day, the little pump just putt-putted along in a marvelous reciprocating cycle. The same piston stroke that pumped water out into the house pipes created a vacuum that drew water in from the well. Pump the water out, draw the water in. Pump the water out, draw the water in.

It was a marvel of hydraulic flow, unless, that is, air bled into the system and the pump lost its prime. Which, of course, it did the first month we were in the house.

At first, priming a pump doesn't seem so hard, not for a smart city lawyer. The fix was right there on page 22 of the owner's manual: simply turn off the pump, pour five gallons of water down into the well pipe, turn the pump back on, and just let the water flow. I was already down in the well pit with my flashlight and wrench before I realized the trap. Where do you get the water? If I had five gallons of water I could make the pump draw, but Mr. City Lawyer didn't have any water. And if I could make the pump draw, I'd have plenty of water, but Mr. City Lawyer couldn't make the pump draw. I was trapped in a vicious circle: no water - no pump; no pump - no water.

I wonder if the disciples sensed a vicious circle closing as Jesus spoke to them at the Last Supper. Jesus was preparing his followers for his crucifixion. You could almost sense the anxiety and loss seeping into the room. While they had lived and worked at Jesus' side, the disciples had experienced the presence of God and the power of God's love flowing from their relationship with him. But how would they have a relationship with Jesus after he left? What would become of God's love?

And if it was a critical question for disciples who had walked with Jesus for three years, it is an even more critical question for us: disciples who have never known Jesus in the flesh. How are we to have a relationship with a Jesus who was crucified 2,000 years before we got here? Who will show us God's love as Jesus showed them. Perhaps like the disciple Philip, we want to ask Jesus directly, "Lord, show us the Father and we will be satisfied."

Jesus answers Philip by going him, and us, one better. He offers to do more than just show us the Father. Jesus promises to send us the Holy Spirit to abide with us. He promises that He and the Father would be dwelling within us, loving us, and driving their love into creation through us.

But as with the farm pump, there is a catch: the divine system needs to be primed too. The indwelling Father, son and Holy Spirit only promise to come to those who keep Jesus' commandments to love God and neighbor. Did you notice? Our readings are all conditioned with monumental "if" clauses:

³⁵*By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, **if you have love for one another.***" [John 13:35];

"15 "If you love me, you will keep my commandments.16 And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate, to be with you forever." [John 14:15-16];

¹⁰*If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commandments and abide in his love.* [John 15:10.]

I think we might be excused for scratching our heads and asking ourselves just exactly where the good news

is in this contingency. I mean, it sounds simple enough. There is nothing metaphysically hard to understand about Christ's love commandment; and most of us commit ourselves rather glibly to the notion of loving our neighbor - at least in the abstract. It's just when we're called to love particular neighbors that we begin to notice our heart's limitations.

We don't need to go to Bagdad or Darfur to see the challenge of neighbor love. We don't even need to go to the borders of Norwalk or Stamford. We can begin by just glancing around our own congregation, a congregation with a well-deserved reputation for warmth and cohesion. And as you glance around, count the number of your brothers and sisters you have actively loved with the unconditional, self-sacrificing, other-regarding love of Christ.

Piously singing of love for all humanity is one thing, actually sacrificing for the particular human being two pews away is another. Most of us recognize a bit of ourselves in Martin Luther as he agonized in his monastic cell, reflecting that he had never spent even a single day entirely loving his God and neighbor as himself.¹ Most of us recognize a bit of ourselves in the little boy riding a mechanical horse with his sister in a shopping mall. Turning back to his sister, he said, "you know, if one of us would get off there would be more room for me."

And maybe now we're beginning to see the circularity Saint Augustine saw in Jesus' Last Supper promises. Writing in the fourth century, Augustine stated the dilemma as follows, "How can we love so as to receive Him, without whom we cannot love at all? Or how shall we keep the commandments so as to receive Him, without whom we have no power to keep them?²

My friends, there was only one way out of this cycle for the disciples and there is only one way out for us. Help could come from only one source for the disciples and help can come from only one source for us. God breaks the cycle by priming the pump for us.

In John's gospel, Jesus had already anticipated the priming of the pump in John 3:16, "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son." And just hours after Jesus concluded his last talk with his disciples, the pump was primed for all time: Jesus gave his life in love for them and for us. As the author of John's Gospel

would write in 1 John 4:19: “*We love because he first loved us.*”

And now, my friends, you and I are gathered around the table that commemorates that love. We pause from a week of distraction and self-assertion to attend to the hour Jesus loved us so that we might love, the hour Jesus died so that we might live.

The mystery of faith is that here, at this table, God primes the pump. We gather bearing our hunger, our wounds, our doubts. Yet, even as we recall God’s love for us, so God turns the vicious circle into a virtuous circle - feeding us, healing us, empowering us to go forth and love likewise.

My friends, the mystery of faith is that as we go forth to love in God’s name, so we come to experience the God who is love. John put it this way in 1 John, “*Beloved, let us love one another because love is from God; everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love.*” [1 John 4:7-8.] Dostoyevsky put it this way in The Brother’s Karamozov, the beloved Elder Zosima teaches that God’s existence cannot be proved, it can only be experienced. “Strive to love your neighbor actively and indefatigably, he says, “In as far as you advance in love you will grow surer of the reality of God and of the immortality of your soul.”³

My friends, all God asks as you gather at this table is that you reflect on God’s love for you. Then, whether your heart bursts aflame with gratitude or just barely catches a spark, you need only respond, you now need only let it flow. As John Wesley wrote, “to use [whatever] grace given you is the certain way to obtain more grace. To use [whatever] faith you have will bring an increase in faith.”⁴ For precisely as you love, so the Spirit will enable you to love more. It’s the marvelous reciprocating cycle of the virtuous circle. Give God’s love out, draw God’s love in. Give God’s love out, draw God’s love in. It’s the divine theology of flow by which God’s love pumps through us and on into creation.

“*We love because he first loved us;*” “*Everyone who loves is born of God and knows God.*” It’s a dynamic as old as the Last Supper and as fresh as the table set before us.

What does the dynamic look like in lived lives? It looks like a Baptist preacher encountering a small boy on his way out the back doors of the church. The boy cringed, for his life in the small town had been a torment of shame. Known as illegitimate, he was taunted everywhere he went. He always tried to sneak in and out of church services unobserved, but this time the new preacher had gotten to the back door before he had made his escape.

“Who are you, son?” the preacher asked, “whose boy are you?” The boy hung his head, bracing for the familiar put down. But as the preacher looked down at him, studying his face, he began to smile a big smile of recognition. “Wait a minute,” he said, “I know who you are. I see the family resemblance. You’re a child of God. And with that he clapped him on the back and said, “Boy, you’ve got a great inheritance, go and claim it.”⁵

The young boy came to faith, the little Baptist church adopted him as their own, and, with their support, Ben Hooper went on to law school and two terms as Governor of Tennessee, a crusader for child labor laws and universal education.

In his memoirs, The Unwanted Boy, Governor Hooper thanked the preacher and the church for the most important words he ever heard spoken, the words that set him on the path of faith and service.

As you take your bread and cup this morning, listen carefully for Christ whispering those words to you as well. “I know who you are. I see the family resemblance. You’re a child of God.” **Amen.**

1 Miroslav Volf, *Free of Charge* (Zondervan, 2006) pp. 133-34

2 Augustine, Tractate 74
<http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/1701074.htm>

3 Fyodor Dostoyevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov* (Barnes and Noble, 2004) p.60

4 John Wesley, “Letter to Miss March,” September 15, 1770.

5 Everett Robert Boyce, *The Unwanted Boy: the Autobiography of Ben W. Hooper* (University of Tennessee, 1963).