Love is the fulfilling of the Law

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Epiphany + 6A. Deut 10 12-22, Ps 119 1-8, 1 Cor 3 1-9, Mt 5 21-37

Kids: You go to the fridge; just a little something sweet would be *so* nice. You open the door, you search for *something* – ***anything***. Then you see it – hidden at the very back behind a large jar of beetroot – a beautiful punnet of the most perfect strawberries you've ever seen. You look behind you – nobody there. You think, *Just one; I can re-pack the punnet so it looks full again.* You reach out, careful not to move the beetroot jar – they'd notice that. You tap the strawberry punnet sideways to where you can grab it safely. But then you see the sticky yellow label; the boldly written words: ***Don't even think about it!*** *Is there really any harm in thinking about it? What might be better?*

Adults: We hear Jesus tell people today that *even thinking about doing* something unkind can do harm. Jesus wants us to love; to ***decide*** not *even to think about* doing harm: to decide not to despise; if someone hurts us, to decide not to plan revenge – but instead to decide to think about how to make things better – to decide to think about how to *end* fights and not to *win* them.

I'm saying the word *decide* a lot, because real love is not so much something we *feel* as something we *decide*. When people get married, when we ask them all those questions about looking after each other, they don't answer, *O sure, that feels right*; they answer, *I will* – and those two words mean *I promise this because I've decided to, not just because I feel like it*. Your feelings can change with a little disagreement; your

decisions; your promises are things you stick to no matter what you feel like. Real love is both a gift and a decision that we will hold to; just as real faith is a gift, and choosing to exercise it is also decision we will hold to – and those decisions make people reliable – committed, loving and reliable – they shape the people we are.

But isn't it enough just to live a life where you don't actually hurt anyone else; isn't that enough? Jesus says no, it isn't. He warns us that we might *do* nothing wrong – we might obey all the laws and do all the good things we're meant to. But even then, if we're in the habit of thinking we can judge and condemn other people, it can cause great harm and hurt our relationships. People *know* if we don't respect them; people *know* if we don't trust them – if we don't approve of them. And who are we to judge anyway?

No-one wants to be around a grumpy, disapproving sort of person. We won't work happily for a boss who never trusts us – who never seems to think we're trying hard enough. But for an encourager – a boss who starts from a basis of trust and respect, you'll do work you never thought you were capable of. It's the same in a sports team; in a choir or orchestra; in a church. If you feel trusted, valued and appreciated, you'll work miracles. Imagine missing out on that! Jesus is telling us not to miss out on the miracles that love can work.

This is the perspective of all today's scriptures. Trust, faith, optimism, good will and love are the best foundation for a community; for a family. Jesus tells us to make them habits of mind; to decide to cultivate love for each other because, as he says twice in this gospel, love is the fulfilling of the Law.

Just two chapters on from today's passage, Jesus says: *In everything do to others as you would have them do to you;* ***for this is the Law and the Prophets.*** (Mt 7:12) And later in the Gospel: *You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart,*

and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: you shall love your neighbour as yourself. ***On these two commandments hang all the Law and the Prophets.*** (Mt 22:36-40) And he's quoting from the Old Testament when he says this; the God of the Hebrews is the same as Jesus. This is nothing new.

When people you care for are thriving, it's really lovely. And it's even better when people you care for get on well with each other. That's what makes good parties so much fun. All your best friends are there, and they like each other – of course you knew they should, because you like them all; you know they're all special people.

But imagine if a fight broke out – a really bad fight – how you'd feel. As a child, I never understood how awful it was for my parents when my brothers and sister and I fought with each other. It was always worst in the car – locked in that confined space together – it only took one finger over an invisible line on the back seat to start it off. Parents love their children. They protect their kids from anyone who might hurt them. But when the kids start hurting each other, it's just awful. The malice and the anger that parents try to protect their children from have come right inside – like an unwanted visitor. And it was invited in by something as small as an unkind thought; a selfish impulse. Jesus teaches us today how we deal with that sort of problem.

The readings today all focus on it. Maybe when we heard them, we thought they were all about laws and rules; do-s and don'ts. What they're really about is love and care; how to nurture love and care in families, communities, societies and organisations. So we heard Moses say that God gave the words on the two tablets of stone '…for your own well-being…' because '…the Lord your God set his heart in love on … you…'(Dt 10.13-14) We heard the Psalmist declare blessed those who '… keep [God's] commands and seek after [God] with their whole heart.'

Ps 119.2 Paul tells the Corinthian Christians to put their differences aside and realise that '…we're God's servants working together…' 1 Cor 3.9 We are presented with a vision of ourselves as a world-healing community. We'll pray for this as we meditate on these scriptures this week.

Two Wolves – A Cherokee Parable

An old Cherokee chief was walking along with his grandchildren when they saw a wolf on a cliff high above them. Pointing at the wolf, the old man told the children.

"A fight is going on inside me." "It is a terrible fight and it is between two wolves.

"One is evil – that wolf is anger, envy, sorrow, regret, greed, arrogance, self-pity, guilt, resentment, inferiority, lies, false pride, superiority, self-doubt, and ego.

"The other is good – that wolf is joy, peace, love, hope, serenity, humility, kindness, benevolence, empathy, generosity, truth, compassion, and faith.

"This same fight is going on inside you – and inside every other person, too."

The children thought about it for a minute and one asked, "Grandpa, which wolf will win?"

The old chief simply replied, "The one you feed."

Author Unknown (possibly a Cherokee parable, and going back probably at least to the 1950's in print – but unconfirmable)