

“I’m All Right in a Sort of a Limited Way for an Off-Night”

John 13:34-35 (Jesus ‘commands’ his disciples to love one another as he has loved them.)

Ephesians 5:1-2 (As children of God we walk in love.)

Galatians 5:14 (Love your neighbor AS you love yourself.)

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It’s tempting for us to want to be not just good, but very very very very good. Tonight many of us will watch the Academy Awards, which are to be given to “the best movie,” “the best actor,” “the best actress.” Sometimes we measure ourselves against our notion of perfection. I’m not sure what song represents a special kind of goodness for a guy, but females might measure ourselves against the feelings of Maria in West Side Story: “I feel pretty, I feel pretty, I feel pretty and witty and bright. And I pity any girl who isn’t me tonight.”

It’s because of this temptation to want to be great, feel fantastic, look wonderful, be successful, that I particularly like this attitude from Paul Simon’s song, “I Know What I Know”: “She looked me over/And I guess she thought/I was all right/ All Right in a sort of a limited way/For an off-night.”¹ Thinking she has this opinion of him, he feels good about himself.

That’s quite a realistic goal—much better than achieving enormous success or perfection of some kind. I can achieve that goal! We all can achieve all rightness in a limited way. Occasionally, we might feel even better about ourselves, almost like Maria on that special night she felt so pretty and witty and bright.

Why did Maria in West Side Story feel so good that night? Why did she think she was the best girl in the whole world?

Remember? It’s because she felt loved.

That leads us to our Scripture Passages for today: “I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.”

When you hear this passage what do you hear? I bet you hear “A commandment: Love one another.” Of course. But listen again: “Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another.” **“Just as I have loved you.” “I have loved you.” “Loved you.” “You.”** This passage is a message for you.

Some psychologists argue that it is almost impossible to love another person if we have not been loved. How can we feel for another what we have not experienced? I’ve never agreed with this view. If it were so, a child unloved by parents or caregivers would be doomed to never experience love—a horrible consequence of being unloved in the first place.

What I think is that at the very core of our experience, deep in our soul, no person is unloved. God loves us all. Therefore, since we are all loved, for sure we can all love.

Why on earth did Jesus call his commandment “new”? Think about this: It was not new to be **commanded** to love. That was the heart of the first five books of the

Hebrew Bible. In Leviticus [19:18] and Deuteronomy [6:4] people were commanded to love.

What was NEW was this little phrase, tucked into the middle of the commandment: “as I have loved you.” Jesus embodied God’s love. He spoke as one who revealed God’s love. He was trying to **help** his disciples—actually, all people—to feel God’s love.²

Paul was following Jesus’ message in his letter to the people at Ephesus [5:1-2] where he suggests something not named elsewhere in the entire New Testament: that we imitate God. How can we imitate God? One answer screams out: **By loving**. “As beloved children” we “live in love, as Christ loved us.”

The little word “AS” has appeared again here. “AS beloved children. We are all loved.” There’s a third “As” passage, in Galatians. What could be more well-known than “Love your neighbor AS yourself”?

I know how precious it feels to be told by your children that **they know you love them**. For you to be sure that someone feels your love is a gift. Think of how it would be, then, for God, if God were assured that we *feel* God’s love, that we feel loved.

If we strive to feel like Maria, pretty and witty and bright, we might not measure up to Maria. But if we seek to feel “All Right in a Sort of a Limited Way” as a beloved one of God, we can surely sing along rather happily with Paul Simon.

When I went to a store to look for a dress for my 40th High School Reunion, a wonderful young sales woman waited on me. I thought she was about 22. She asked what the dress was for, and I said “my high school reunion.” She said that she and her friends were beginning to think about their first reunion. I asked her when she graduated, and she said she was actually still a senior in High School; they were planning now to be in touch with each other in 5 years for their 5th year reunion. Then she asked me what year reunion I was going to. I said, “40th.” She almost dropped my dress. She turned to me and said, “They *have* 40th reunions?” I was going to feel pretty and witty and bright that night, but I did manage to feel at least “All Right in a Sort of a Limited Way”

I felt a whole lot better than John O’Reilly in the movie *Chicago*. He’s the husband of the lead woman. At one point he tells us, the audience, how he feels with these words: “. . . Everyone gets noticed now and then, unless of course that personage should be, me, inconsequential me. Cellophane, Mr. Cellophane shou’d a been my name, ‘cause you can look right through me, walk right by me, and never know I’m there.” He goes on: “A human being’s made of more than air with all that bulk you’re bound to see him there, unless that human being next to you . . . is . . . you know who.” When he finishes telling us his feelings, he adds these words, “I hope I didn’t take up too much of your time.” That husband in the movie *Chicago* created a narrative for himself. He described his experience to be like “A Cellophane Man.”

If we are not satisfied with our lives, or how we feel about ourselves, we have the opportunity to change our narrative, the way we describe our life, our story. Mr. Cellophane man could change his way of seeing himself. He could grow to see that he is at least “Okay, in a limited sort of way.” You and I can be “Okay for the genes we were given.” “Just fine, given what we’ve been through.” Or, “Good, and getting better.”

Jesus’ “New” Commandment encourages us to tell our story with a positive twist. Telling our story in this way “is an act of hope, and even defiance, because it carries within it the power to change.”³

Even though movies, actors and actresses will be dubbed “Best” tonight, the characters they portray in the movies are not seen in their contexts as “best.”

The Curious Case of Benjamin Button shows us an implausible misfit who manages to feel okay about himself, and to be loved, at every stage of his unusual life. He is born old and grows toward infancy. Over and over in this too-long movie Benjamin is reminded mostly by his adoptive mother and woman friends that he is just fine as he is, wrinkled as a baby and getting younger-looking by the day, as he gets physically older. This message would seem to be compatible with Paul Simon’s acceptance of himself as “okay in a sort of a limited way.” It’s certainly a message that is compatible with Jesus’ command to love *ourselves* as we love others. However, Brad Pitt plays the Benjamin Button role, and Brad Pitt is so much more than okay in a sort of a limited sort of way that the movie-makers could not resist one line in the movie, about half-way through, that messes up their whole altruistic point. When Brad Pitt is free of aging make up and looks exactly like himself, his girlfriend in the movie looks at him and says, “You’re perfect.” What happened to the “You’re okay however different you are message?”

The character Michael Sheen plays, in Frost/Nixon, just a “game show host,” may have gotten himself into something beyond his abilities, when he proposes interviewing Nixon before the world’s eyes. The first interviews go badly, several rather “off-nights” for the interviewer, until he’s finally really on, and millions of viewers are amazed at how he manages to facilitate Nixon’s honesty.

Sean Penn, in Milk, runs for County Supervisor in San Francisco in large measure to help others who are gay like him to feel “okay in a limited sort of way” about themselves. He’s empowered to run for office because he has managed to feel okay about himself; he wants others to feel that way too.

Slumdogs—kids who grow up in the dumps of India, sleeping in highway pipes, being chased from here to there, live a precarious existence. Dev Patel portrays one who managed to get from slumdog to TV quiz show contestant and happens to know the right answers. He maintains a good sense of himself as an okay person, throughout an almost uncountable number of ordeals. Why? Because he loves, and is loved.

If self acceptance is such a prevalent theme in the five movies nominated for best picture, it’s no stretch to imagine that many of the narratives that we here in this sanctuary have created to describe our own lives include some ways of dealing with self-acceptance, too. As we look forward or backward at our lives, and in both directions at the same time, we can sing a song that affirms our goodness, our being loved, no matter what.

Our biblical ancestors were *lost in the wilderness*, but they narrated their lives to be a *people with a promised land*. Jesus *died*, but the narrative that continues is that he was transformed. He lives again in so many ways. Illness meant *ostracism*, but Jesus reframed that, so that now we seek to embrace ill persons *within a community of care*.

I really like a phrase I hear today, usually from younger generations. When one asks another if they need something and they don’t, their answer is, “I’m good.” Would you all practice that response? [“I’m good.”]

That phrase, “I’m good,” is a great narrative for all of our lives. Maybe some day we’re so good we feel like Maria, pretty and witty and bright. Recall why she felt that way? Because she was loved. Maybe some days we feel like Paul Simon, “All right in a sort of a limited way for an off night.” Remember why he felt that way? Because he was

thinking that someone liked him. We don't have to be Brad Pitt (perfect); we can be slumdogs who feel loved enough to accept ourselves as we are. We can accept Jesus' "New" Commandment, loving others AS we love ourselves.

¹ Paul Simon, "I Know What I Know" *Graceland* CD. Track 9.

² This passage can be read either as part of the last supper Jesus shared with his friends or the beginning of his farewell discourse. Either way, the central theme is that Jesus' love has shown them how they can love. His love can be imitated.

³ Herbert Anderson & Edward Foley, *Mighty Stories, Dangerous Rituals*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass A Wiley Company, 1998, 11-12.