LOVE IS A FOUR-LETTER WORD
May 10, 2009, The Fifth Sunday in Easter
I John 4: 7-21
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Theme: Love is something you do more than it is something you say.

May your word be to us as sharp as any two-edged sword, piercing our souls with its truth. May ancient Scripture find us here and now, and may it form us, form the choices we make every day – at home, at work, at church. And now may the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, my Rock and my Redeemer. Amen.

Krister Stendahl, who died a year ago last month, was one of the great New Testament scholars of our time. After years as a beloved professor at Harvard Divinity School, Stendahl finally returned to his native Sweden to become the Lutheran Bishop of Stockholm. Unlike many New Testament scholars I have known, unlike many fellow Swedes I have know, Krister Stendahl was possessed of a rich sense of humor. For example, there’s his wise and wicked little essay called The Ten Commandments for Biblical Preaching. His ninth commandment for preaching is "You shall not use the word love (in the sermon) unless it is in the text," that is, in the Bible reading of the day. Stendahl quipped that his ninth commandment, "sobers up preaching wonderfully."

Well, the word “love” appears in the text that Catherine just read no fewer than 21 times! So according Stendahl, I dare talk about love in the sermon. But whether I have permission or not, I must confess that I have to grit my teeth every time I preach on the topic. This is an odd confession for a minister. It’s certainly not because I don’t believe in love. Love is the chief verb of the Christian faith. I tremble at preaching about love because the topic has been so over-handled, love has been so endlessly pawed that it’s worn thin – like an old coin too long in circulation. Love has been fondled by so many preachers and poets and romance novelists, it has so over-dosed on sugar that it sometimes sinks to merest sentimentality. Sentimentality is generally defined as a view of the world which

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concentrates attention too much on the sweet, the warm, kind, and cloying, while not paying sufficient attention to the hard, grim, often nasty realities that are also a part of the human experience.

It is stunningly ironic that Christian love could ever be flattened into anything close to sentimentality. Christian love cannot be disconnected from the cross. The cross is planted square in the heart of our faith and the cross is, after all, is the high water mark in the flood of exactly those hard, grim and nasty realities that sentimentality overlooks. In the middle of those verses from John we just heard, slathered in love as they are, John has planted the cross. "God sent his son," John says "to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins." The love our faith bespeaks is grounded in the hard reality of human sin. The love our faith bespeaks is sobered by this emblem of jealously, power plays and torture. The love our faith bespeaks is anchored in this standing reminder of unjust death.

“Love” is not one of the four-letter words we teach our children not to say, but the word does have four letters and, rightly understood, “love” is as hard and edgy, perhaps even as scandalous, as the foulest of four-letter words. In this sermon, I want to name three reasons why “love” really ought to be classified as a four-letter word.

The first is this: Contrary to a lot of popular notions, Love is a choice. There’s a recklessly dangerous idea floating around that suggests that loving somebody is something that just happens to you, kind of like catching the flu. You can’t prevent it; you can’t make it happen; you can’t choose it. I see this idea a lot on TV and in romantic movies. I sometimes hear it from couples when I counsel troubled marriages. They often tell me they “just fell out of love,” as if it was something that innocently happened to them on the way to Duane Reed rather than the sour fruit of choices they had made.

In the Bible passage we heard today, John commands love. He names love a commandment. In the Gospels, when Jesus was asked what the greatest commandment was, he named two: “love God, and love neighbor.” Jesus commands love. He doesn't suggest it as a way you ought to feel feel. He doesn't recommend it. "This I command you,” he says, “that you love one another.” And

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if it can be commanded, it means love is a \textit{choice} we make or don’t make. Gandhi once said, "There is no love where there is no will." Presbyterian writer Fred Buechner said as much when he wrote, "In the Christian sense, love is not primarily an emotion, but an act of will...."

When I meet with engaged couples to plan their wedding, I always spend a session going over the wedding service. We read it through together and talk about the words. One curious point always arises in this discussion. If they don't bring it up, I do. It always seems odd to couples – usually young and in love – that the wedding service hardly ever uses the word “love.” Sometimes they ask, "Isn’t our wedding a celebration of our love?"

I jolt them with my answer. "No,” I say, “not exactly. The wedding service assumes you love each other. Love is the raw material you bring to the day.” Then I ramble on, “Love is an emotion, of course, but love is more than how you feel. Yes, you bring that fire, that sentiment, that powerful emotion of love to your marriage. But in the wedding service, the verb of the day is not love. The words that fill the wedding service are words like "vow," and "commitment" and "promise" and "covenant." A marriage ought to be seeded with the \textit{feeling} of love. But love, like any human emotion, has its ups and downs. Feelings can be notoriously capricious, rising and falling with mood and fortune. “The covenant of marriage,” I lecture them, “takes this powerful, if variable, sentiment and hardens it, tempers it, grows it into something much deeper and more lasting. In an act of will, the mere emotion they name of “our love” can grow by the grace of God into a relationship that outlasts all the vagaries of life.

“Commitment” throws a bridge over emotion's valleys. “Promise” keeps you present when you feel emotionally dead. “Covenant” guards you until emotion reawakens. This is a truth not just about marriage, but about all relationships in life: commitment, decision, the act of will – this is what pulls love beyond transience and sentiment. So the first reason love is a four-letter word is that, like it or not, love is not just how you happen to feel, love is a choice you make.

The second reason love is a four-letter word is that it can be, in fact often is, really tough to do. The other four-letter words may \textit{sound} tough; this one really is.

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Some years ago, I was counseling a family with a teenage son deep into drugs. His family loved him like life itself and had tried everything. He’d get himself into druggie financial problems and beg his parents to lend him money. He’d land in jail and ask his mom and dad to bail him out. He stole things out of the house. They didn’t know what to do. I helped them find a group for parents who had kids in major trouble. The group was called "Tough Love." It was a great organization and it helped this family. It helped them to say "no" when he asked for money to get him out of jail for the third time. But I must tell you, I always thought that the name of the group was odd: "Tough Love" – as if all love isn't tough, as if there were such a thing as “easy love.”

This is a truth that every parent, certainly every mother, knows only too well. In loving a child there is great joy, and there is great pain. What children bring, what any real love brings, is something beyond even happiness. Love ushers us right into the deeps of what it means to be fully human. To love, to love tough and to love sacrificially, to love a child, to love a parent, a man or a woman, even to love your neighbor more than you love yourself, is to be pulled into a new country. This new country is one with steep paths to ascend and there are watery torrents to cross, but lasting love is a land of stunning beauty and great joy.

The late Madeline L'Engle, best known as the author of A Wrinkle in Time, wrote a wonderful book about her long marriage to actor Hugh Franklin shortly after his death a number of years ago. She entitled it A Two-Part Invention. One passage reads: “Vulnerable, the moment we are born we are vulnerable... When I married I opened myself up to the possibility of great joy and great pain and I have known both. Hugh's death is like an amputation. But would I be willing to protect myself by having rejected marriage? By having rejected love? No, I wouldn't have missed a minute of it, not any of it.”

Mother Teresa once wrote: “A living love hurts. Jesus, to prove his love for us, died on the cross. The mother, to give birth to her child, has to suffer. If you really love another properly,” she concludes, “there must be sacrifice.”

The last reason love is a four-letter word is that love is more something you do than it is something you say. Yes, we should speak love. All in all, it’s a good
thing that most people today are freer about telling each other how deeply they care for each other than they used to be. It brings to mind the old joke about “the Swedish farmer up in Minnesota who loved his wife so much he almost told her.” It’s a very good thing to tell someone you love them. I commend it. But at the end of the day, words are words. The German playwright, Berthold Brecht once complained, "Words, words, can't you give us anything but words?"

So it is a good thing to speak your love to your husband or your wife, but remember, love is more something you do. Yes, tell your parents, tell them often. But remember, words are words. Tell your kids you love them, but remember, when it's 9:15 at night and you're exhausted and one of them needs help with an English assignment, love is something you do. It's a rich thing to talk about love here at church, but when somebody asks you to teach the 7th grade class, remember that love is something you do. When you see a sign-up sheet for the Friday Night Meal, remember that love is something you do. When somebody asks you to give up a Saturday to Habitat for Humanity or to tutor at the Children’s Storefront School in Harlem, or work in the Watson Hall kitchen, remember that love is something you do.

Love is a four-letter word because it’s choice.
Love is a four-letter word because it's tough.
Love is a four-letter word because it's something you do.

I like a good quote almost as much as I like a good story. One of my favorite pithy quotes comes from Thornton Wilder's fine novel, *The Bridge of San Luis Rey*. It’s a good place to end. Wilder wrote:

"There is a land of the living and a land of the dead. The bridge is love, the only truth, the only survival."

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.