

A Mindset of Love

A sermon preached at Faith Episcopal Church on May 2, 2010

We continue our skipping around in time courtesy of the Gospel of John. Today we revisit the Gospel reading heard every Maundy Thursday – Jesus has washed the feet of his disciples, much to their discomfort – it is so unseemly and humble a task for someone they look up to. I'll bet that there were some thought along the line of – do I want to be known as a follower someone who does the menial work of a servant? The reason that Jesus did the work of a servant was, of course, to teach them something new. “A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another; just as I have loved you, you also should love one another.” I doubt that that helped them to feel any more comfortable – after all, he equated washing someone's feet to love. How would they do that?

Oddly enough, it was the voice of Clint Eastwood, in one of his most iconic roles that clarified things for me. And no, Jesus didn't say “Go ahead, make my day.” I was thinking of him as the man with no name in *The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly*. As he and Eli Wallach, who played the Ugly, reached the place where gold they were seeking had been buried Clint, in his usual sardonic style said, “There are two kinds of people in the world, those with loaded guns and those who dig. You dig.”

It's surprising true how often things are neatly put into one of two categories. I even found a website dedicated to cataloging such pithy observations. There are two kinds of people in the world: Pessimists and Optimists; those who make things complicated, and those who make things simple.

“There are two kinds of people in the world – those who walk into a room and say, ‘There you are!’ – and those who say, ‘Here I am!’ ”

There are two types of vessels on the sea - submarines and targets.

There are three kinds of people in the world, those who are good at math and those who aren't.

Dr. Carol Dweck, a professor of psychology at Stanford has a really important addition to these categories. In her book *Mindset; The New Psychology of Success* she describes the two basic mindsets that appear to be fairly universal. She came to identify these as mindsets after an experiment involving children and some challenging puzzles. Some of the kids were excited when they had to work to figure things out, and getting it wrong was just part of the learning process. Her first thought was, “What's wrong with them?” It appeared that these kids “knew that human qualities such as intellectual skills, could be cultivated through effort. And that's what they were doing – getting smarter. Nor only weren't they discouraged by failure, they didn't even think they were failing. They thought they were learning.

I (meaning Dr. Dweck), on the other hand, thought human qualities were carved in stone. You were smart or you weren't and failure meant you weren't. It was that simple. If you could arrange successes and avoid failures (at all costs), you could stay smart. Struggles, mistakes and perseverance were just not part of this picture.”

Dr. Dweck has taken this observation and identified it all in areas of life. She calls them the fixed mindset and the growth mindset. Children, who are constantly told that they are smart and that things come to them naturally, tend to be of the fixed mindset. Those who are praised for the

effort that they put into something develop the growth mindset and the implications are huge. The naturally gifted (and so repeatedly identified as such) children tend not do well when they come up against something that they have trouble with. They often give up or cheat when they might fail at something. She gives the examples of a couple of young Pulitzer Prize winning journalists. Very early in their careers they produces their winning stories which later turned out to have been made up – they could not give themselves time to learn on the job – they had to prove that they perfect or they were nothing.

This phenomenon shows up clearly with athletes. John McEnroe was naturally gifted – he was the best because he had the best skills – he didn't have to work at it. The problems came when he wasn't doing well – he turned into John McEnroe – throwing tantrums, blaming everyone and everything – mostly being terrified and unhappy. He thought that his talent was a fixed thing – it was what it was and nothing could change it. Michael Jordan on the other hand – equally gifted physically rose to the top and stayed there because he believed that he could always be getting better. No one worked harder than he did. The older and slower he got, the harder he worked on other aspects of his game and remained great. Losing a game was simply something that showed him what he needed to work on.

These mindsets are present in our ideas about love. Dr. Dweck did a lot of interviewing of people about relationships and everyone had a story about having been dumped. The follow up questions gave evidence of how people approached such a painful experience. As with sports, some folks believed that love was a fixed thing and if it was real, it should never need to be work on. She said, “When people had the fixed mindset, they felt judged and labeled by the rejections. Permanently labeled. It was as though a verdict had been handed down and branded on their foreheads: UNLOBABLE! And they lashed out.” Dr. Dweck noted, however, that people with a growth mindset have little taste for vengeance. For them such experiences are about understanding, forgiving, and moving on. “Although they were often deeply hurt by what happened, they wanted to learn from it.

So what does this have to do with Jesus commandment to love one another as he loved us? We have to ask ourselves some questions here – first, do we think that love is something that is it either there or not? Do we automatically know how to do or can we learn it, can we get better at it? No surprise here, I believe that it is the latter. In fact there may be few things for which we all have to put effort in like this one. It is hard; it seems contrary to all of our survival impulses. In a culture that describes success as being better than someone or everyone else this will not be natural to most of us. It was hard for Jesus' disciples to see nobility in a task consigned to society's losers.

This love as Jesus described it is not an emotion it's a mindset, it's a decision with follow through that we can learn. To do so will take as much practice as learning any new skill. The important thing will be the mindset that we have about this Christian love. I invite you to see it as an adventure in growing spiritually that will bring you to places of unimagined peace and satisfaction. We can all become better Christians – the Kingdom of Love is certainly worth the effort.