

The “Two Feet” of Christian Love, Part 1

A sermon shared with the congregation of St. Andrew’s United Church

September 6, 2020

by Rev. Dave Le Grand

I will be honest. I didn’t know a great deal about St. Catherine of Siena. But thanks to this week’s reading from Romans, and a commentary that pointed me to Catherine’s life, I learned a little bit more about her. ¹

The very modern Bible translation you heard Brennan read this morning is an excerpt from a letter that the apostle Paul wrote to the church. What stuck out for me were his words...

When you love others, you complete what the law has been after all along. ²

The law he is referring to is the whole of the Ten Commandments. You and I embracing the love Jesus taught us to live fully. To embrace it, to live it, every moment of every day. That love keeps us on track to honour those Commandments.

It sounds simple. But we all know that nothing is that simple. And here is where Catherine of Siena comes in. She grew up in, you’re not going to believe this, she was the 24th of 25 children, born into a comfortable family. But her twin died so her parents smothered her a bit. She developed into a rather obstinate child. She wanted to be in the church all the time; she imagined being mystically married to Christ. Her parents wanted her to marry a real man, to be comfortable. She had these profound spiritual experiences of Jesus, that really made her parents more protective, controlling. History tells us whose vision for Catherine’s life won out.

The world around Catherine was in turmoil. The Catholic church split and gripped by conflict. The Black Plague was ravaging her 14th Century world. As she became an adult, her contemplative, prayerful life fed her soul – stories and images poured out of her. She felt compelled by her faith to reach out and care for her world, being with people as they suffered, and often died.

Her one vision of God speaking resonates with me. In that vision God says to her:

*On two feet you must walk my way; on two wings you must fly to heaven.*³

One foot grounded in the holy,
one foot grounded in this very real world.

Balance. As Jesus in the Gospel of Mark is teaching about the commandments and he’s asked by an earnest academic, “Which is the most important commandment?”

Jesus’ response:

...you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength.’ The second ... ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ ⁴

¹ The connection with St. Catherine of Siena came from a commentary on Romans 13 by Eleazar S. Fernan dez. *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary - Year A, Volume 4: Season After Pentecost 2 (Propers 17-Reign of Christ).*

² Romans chapter 13, verse 8. *The Message.* Copyright © 1993, 2002, 2018 by Eugene H. Peterson

³ Raymond of Capua, *Life of St. Catherine of Siena*, p. 121. © 1960 Harvill Press and P. J. Kenedy & Sons.

⁴ Mark chapter 12 verses 28-31. *New Revised Standard Version Bible*, copyright © 1989 the Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

Balances – connecting deeply with our Creator, but also caring for our world. Love is at the heart of that balance, but it's not simple. In fact, it can be very challenging.

This has been quite a summer, hasn't it? I've heard from many of you just how challenging these times are. Some have managed to cope... Others of us, it has been tedious. While we don't have the Plague killing us, we have a pandemic. And **we have had to adapt** to (maybe "cope with" is more accurate?) a wide array of changes in our world. Quarantined to our homes and families when we started. For some of us that meant being alone in our apartments.

We have been inundated with information on one topic, it seems. Statistics daily, new regimens that we must follow. Even as we have been able to get out and do errands, there is this baseline of anxiety in our culture, in the media, in our homes.

I'm going to be honest. *I feel it.* My reality is being at home with my restless kids. Name your reality; how have these times buffeted you with anxiety and new regimes that feel abnormal, even absurd?

I am not a contemplative mystic, and certainly not a saint, but that image that Catherine of Siena offers is striking – two feet needed to walk, to follow Jesus in our everyday living. *If they are not in balance, walking through everyday life becomes difficult.*

Too much of our time spent praying, learning the Bible stories, and we insulate ourselves in hermetically sealed bubbles. Bubbles, we have learned, are important for keeping us safe, but inside that bubble, we become disconnected, desperate. I see that hunger for connection in the news lately, young adults ignoring distancing rules, flocking together. It's been gruelling on our souls, COVID.

Too much on the other foot, being too much in the world that isn't healthy either. Watching a few hours of news with its 24-hour cycle of bad news, and I get jaded, angry. Preachers become politicians when too much on that foot. I have noticed whenever I have been travelling that there are people I would call *professional travellers* – they often seem rootless because there is no "home". People who fight tirelessly for justice, who care for others but without a spiritual practice of some sort, they can burn out. Without roots, we are tossed helplessly in the wind.

So, I'm taking stock now, Labour Day weekend: *Are my two Christian feet in good balance?* Is my connecting with God in balance with caring for my world? How about for you?

I want to take Paul's words seriously this month; **to keep love of God, myself and my neighbour all in balance.** You are here, so it looks like you take your love of God seriously. What practices do you have in place to keep that connection strong?

For me, I find that in precious quiet moments when I talk to God. How about you? Loving God and being loved extravagantly – I think that those two loves interconnect with one another. What are our habits that allow us to listen to what our heart and our head says?

We might read again Scripture stories that remind us of our *child of God-ness* – like Jesus telling his listeners not to worry – yeah, right Jesus! Jesus presses on. Do not get ensnared by life's problems. Look at the birds of the air; [Jesus says,] they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet [God] feeds them. ⁵

⁵ Matthew chapter 6, verse 26 *New Revised Standard Version*

Loving God and ourselves is important. Loving our neighbour – again it sounds simple. But it isn't, is it? It requires of us that we pay attention to our spiritual life, that we listen to the wisdom of people we respect. We are going to talk much more about loving our neighbour this Fall in worship.

How do you love your neighbour in your life? Here are a handful of my thoughts:

- Love is caring about others enough to wear a mask;
- And, the Love that Jesus and Paul teach about is a radical, I would say it is a complex love to live out in our lives; loving especially the neighbour really don't want to love.

Maybe something about the neighbour rattles us, baffles us, maybe that neighbour evokes in us such a reaction that we need to take a moment, *maybe a few moments*, go back to step one to experience the love of God so deeply again that we find the courage to love the neighbour.

This is what we were created for – Love. But we need those two feet firmly grounded in God and world. Amen.