



“Beyond Pop Love”

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Love, love, love . . . Love is everywhere don't you think? At least the word “love” is everywhere. We can see love and hear love several times in a single day. Seriously, think about it. How many times on a day do you hear or see something related to the word “love”? Let me give an example. When I commute from Berkeley to Hayward I see at least 100 bumper stickers and signs with the word “love” on them. The most typical I see are these, “I love my kids.” This is a very popular one; there are also some very Christian bumper stickers that say “God loves you,” and “Jesus loves you.” The radio is full of love songs as well; among some that I can remember are “All You Need is Love,” “In the Name of Love,” and Christian songs like “Jesus Lover of My Soul.” The same happens with movies. For instance “Eat, Pray, Love,” “Love and other Drugs,” “Love in the Time of Cholera,” etc. We are just flooded with this word. We are so familiar with the word “love,” in part because we see it and hear it everywhere, at every moment, that very few times are we truly challenged to act boldly and express love in that manner. Love is such a popular concept that it is very easy to take it for granted, in our life and in the world. Today's scripture, though, is inviting us to do the opposite—to reflect more critically about the concept of love that popular culture has softened down. But we are called to go beyond “pop love,” and to give “Christian love” a higher value.

There are several reasons why love and pop culture are associated. And it is important for us to consider these reasons, especially because in church we talk a lot about love. I gave some examples of pop songs and titles of recent movies that have the word “love” in their titles, because when I see a sign that says “Jesus loves you” or “God loves you,” I wonder if this phrase is about God's character, are just part of the same pop culture that talks so much about love. Scholars suggest that “the predominant theme of popular music lyrics has always been—and continues to be today—love.”¹ Music and movies are instruments that pop culture uses to keep up a certain social standard. It creates a fantasy, so to speak, that doesn't reflect necessarily the reality of a society, but what is thought to be real. Scholars put it this way: “Popular music is one of the

¹ Ian Inglis, Variations on a Theme: The Love Songs of the Beatles. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3108435>

vehicles—along with sport and cinema—through which the energies of the population are deflected.”² In this way people are distracted and often forget to challenge political and economical conditions, which produces oppression and marginalization in their communities. We hear and see a lot about love through music and movies, through pop culture in general. But to what extent do we associate God’s love with pop love?

In the letter to the Romans, Paul is talking about love, but something beyond the pop idea in which oftentimes we are immersed. He invites the Romans to love one another, but the context in which Paul is talking about love to the Romans is not an easy one. Paul is saying this: “Love your neighbor as yourself. Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore, love is the fulfillment of the law.”³ Romans was written during the 1st CE about the year 57 CE, and around these years Christians were highly persecuted in Rome. Nine years after that letter was written, one of the major Jewish revolts began in Palestine against the Roman occupation. It’s in the midst of this difficult situation, both politically and economically, that Paul is telling the Christian community in Rome to love boldly . . . to love their neighbor as themselves.

If you have a chance to read the whole chapter, you’ll see that the language is a lot about obedience, submission, and being good to Roman authorities. This causes some trouble for the Jewish community in Rome. On the one hand, these are times of revolt, of persecution. And on the other hand, obeying all of the Roman laws also means bowing down before pagan deities, which for the Jewish community is an abomination. Yet Paul is telling the Christian Romans to love their neighbor. They should love their persecutor, oppressor, and pagan Roman neighbors as themselves.

This struggle was not only to love the Roman authorities. There were also all sorts of conflicts between Jewish Christians and gentile Christians. To love thy neighbor, even within the same Christian community, was difficult. For the Christian community in Rome, the concept “to love one another” was not an easy one. In order to love thy neighbor in the context of the letter required a lot of effort. They had not only to go beyond self-prejudice towards people from a different culture—they had to have a lot of courage in order to respond in ways that could truly reflect the character of God; to respond out of genuine love, mercy, and grace; and not be moved by the popular sentiments of their time.

Social justice is not exempt from the influences of pop culture. In progressive Christian circles, very often, people create a romantic idea of reality, including issues of poverty and oppression. In an academic setting like the GTU in Berkeley where I’m studying, it’s easy to talk about love for the poor, to talk about racial diversity, about integration and

² Ian Inglis, Variations on a Theme: The Love Songs of the Beatles. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3108435>

³ *The New Revised Standard Version (Anglicized Edition)*, copyright 1989, 1995 by 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.

reconciliation. In that context is easy to fall in love with the poor and the oppressed. We do so through books, liberation theologies, black theologies, feminist theologies. We repeat and hear the word “oppressed” and “marginalized” as often as the radio plays love songs. All mainline denominations, in general, have created this pop culture, I think, where it is the fashion to be in favor of the poor, to be with the minorities, with those who are in the margin. I wonder if we talk so much about social justice that we have created a pop culture around the poor and oppressed.

For me, dear brothers and sisters, it has taken a week at Cherryland Elementary School to realize that social justice is not as romantic as it looks in my papers. Although I get good grades, the reality surpasses the books. Systemic oppression, racial segregation, the poor, the needy, the marginalized, are not as pretty or cool as they sound in our progressive and liberal conversations at PSR.

The way in which we are called to love in this scripture from Romans is one that requires effort, but not just any kind of effort. In order to love thy neighbor it takes a lot of energy to understand each other; it takes a lot of time to establish a relationship with each other. I’m not going to lie to you—to love thy neighbor is not an easy thing to do, but there is good news. The good news is that it is possible to do. The good news is that it doesn’t take a lot of people to do it; it takes one at a time. The good news is that others have done it before us. This is my pop way of saying it. I’m going to quote a U2 song to finish today’s message. “One man come in the name of love, one man come and go. One man come he to justify, one man to overthrow. In the name of love . . . What more in the name of love?”