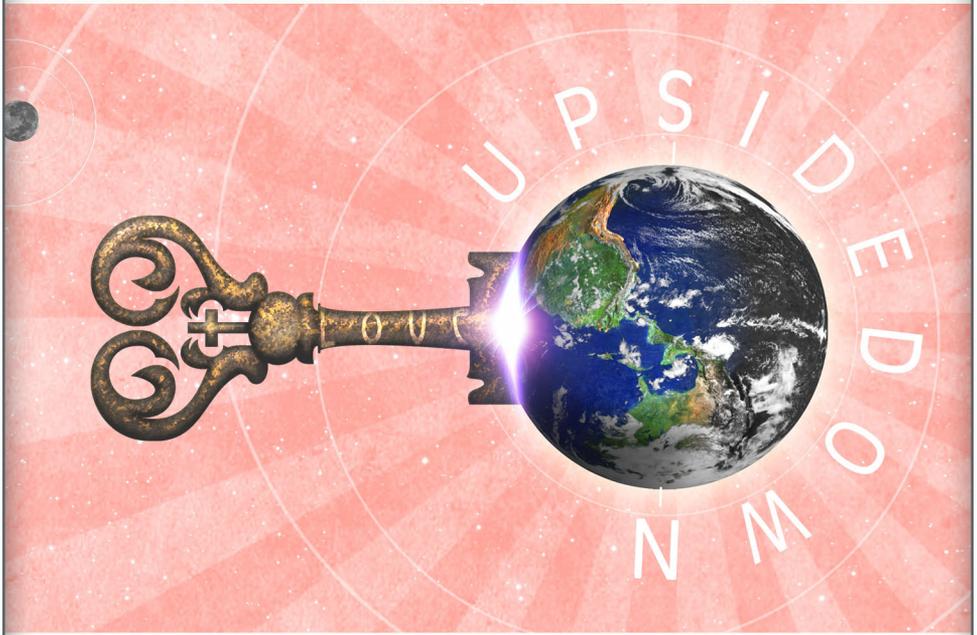


GOING DEEPER

DISCUSSION GUIDE

May 8, 2016



Discussion Guide

Engaging Our World

Connecting:

45 minutes

(The following questions are intended to provide your group with a way of connecting with one another so that you might partner in the work God is doing in your lives.)

- IN WHAT WAYS DID GOD MOVE IN YOUR LIFE THIS WEEK? IN WHAT WAYS DID YOU RESPOND TO HIM?
- WHAT WAS YOUR BIGGEST CHALLENGE THIS WEEK? IN WHAT WAYS, IF ANY, DID YOU INVITE GOD INTO THIS CHALLENGE?
- HOW HONEST HAVE YOU BEEN WITH US? (Graciously thank group

members for their honesty if they state they have held back.)

Getting Started:

10 minutes

- If you want something done, do you feel it is easier to woo or command? Could you elaborate?

Diving Into the Text:

60 minutes

(The following questions are intended to provide your group with a simple road map through the text. Feel free to use these questions in ways that best fit your group and the dynamics of your own meeting.)

- Using the notes, discuss the background

and context of the concept of covenantal love.

- Read Romans 12.9-21 aloud. Pause, and read the text once more.
- In this passage, Paul describes the marks of an authentic (not faking it) love directed to believers and non-believers. What are the marks he outlines? Seek to discover as many as possible.
- As you consider the ways believers engage with one another, would you say their interactions would match the marks Paul outlines? Why might this be?
- As you consider the ways believers engage with the world, would you say their interactions would match the marks of love for non-believers Paul outlines? Why might this be?
- What might it look like to engage the world on the terms Paul describes?
- Read John 3.16-17 and Romans 5.6-8 aloud. In what ways might the redemptive mission of Christ illustrate what it looks like to engage the world with love?
- What, if anything, keeps us from engaging the world in this manner?
- What might happen if we did engage the world in this way?
- Conclude your time together in prayer, opening yourselves to receive God's love so that you might learn to engage others in love.

CONTEXT AND BACKGROUND

LOVE

The concept of love is one which transcends cultures. Every culture has a common understanding of the core concept of love to which it adds various nuances as to the appropriate cultural expression of this core concept. At its core, love is an inner quality expressed outwardly as a commitment to seek the well-being of the other. Our own modern American culture understands the outward expression of love within categories of emotion and passion at times coupled with acts of service. While emotion and passion can be part of one's love for another, within Scripture,

the primary expression of love is understood to be covenantal devotion.

Unlike a contract which is governed by rules and involves obligations which involve objects or actions, covenants involve people and are governed by commitments of devotion. Thus, to speak of love as covenantal devotion is to speak of love as the giving of oneself to another as an act or commitment of devotion. Such is the relationship of love which Scripture holds forth as the appropriate relationship between God and people.

The primary example of love as covenantal devotion in Scripture is that of God's relationship with Israel. The entire narrative of God's relationship with Israel is based upon a covenant of love (Deuteronomy 4.31-37). God's rescue of, provision for, and guidance of Israel is rooted in his covenant of love, the giving of himself to the Israelites in devotion. Such love from God calls for a similar response from the Israelites (Deuteronomy 6.4-6) and is expressed in the obedience of the Torah through which Israel imitates God's loving character (Deuteronomy 24.17-18).

Because the relationship between God and Israel is covenantal and not contractual, that is, it rests upon the giving of one's person in devotion and not on rules, it is not easily broken even when one party does not act in good faith to the covenant. Such is God's love for Israel. God views himself as betrothed to Israel (Hosea 3.1), and though she be unfaithful, he pursues her and woos her back because his love involves his person and not conditions (Hosea 2.16-23; 14.1-8; Jeremiah 2.20-25).

This example of covenantal love between God and Israel serves as the backdrop for understanding the ministry of Christ. God's redemptive ministry in Christ is rooted in love (John 3.16-17), a covenantal devotion to his creation not dependent upon rules but resting upon the giving of God's person. Though creation, though the actions of people, have not been true to the covenant, God pursues his creation and seeks to woo it back in love (1 John 3.1; 4.1-10). This covenantal love of God calls for a response of love from people (Matthew 22.37-40) and people honor this covenant through obedience which imitates God's own loving character (Matthew 22.37-40; 1 John 4.10-11; Romans 12.9-21).

THE TEXT

JOHN 3.16-17: *GOD'S MISSION OF LOVE*

These verses are some of the most familiar and oft quoted verses of the New Testament, though often quoted without context. In John 3, Jesus is discussing how a person might enter the Kingdom of God with Nicodemus. That the two are discussing the Kingdom of God is not surprising as the Kingdom figured prominently in Jesus' teaching, forming the core of his gospel proclamation (Mark 1.14-15). To proclaim the Kingdom of God in a Jewish context was to proclaim the in-breaking of God's reign. To speak of entering the Kingdom of God was to speak of aligning oneself not just with God but also with what God was doing in the world. Thus to speak of the Kingdom involves issues of relationship and mission. It is therefore natural for Jesus' conversation to turn to issues of relationship and mission and how the two overlap. In verse 16, Jesus states that the mission of God in the world is motivated by love; that is, the arrival of the Kingdom in the person of Jesus (Mark 1.14-15) is rooted in the love of God for the world (the entirety of creation). While the modern reader is tempted to interpret these words in terms of affection, it is better to understand them in terms of covenant. God's love for the world is nothing short of covenantal devotion to his creation, a creation which through the actions of people has not returned covenantal devotion to God. Because God's connection with creation is covenantal and not contractual, he pursues his creation seeking to woo it back to himself through love, not judgment, attempting to reclaim its covenantal devotion.

Hearing these words within the context of covenant adds a great depth of meaning, both to God's mission and to the idea of Kingdom. In terms of covenant, Kingdom is more about relationship than rule, a relationship of covenantal love between God and his creation. Second, the mission of God involves more than saving people from Hell but is nothing short of God's loving pursuit of that to which he has forever bound himself. God's mission through Jesus to the world is much like his overtures of love toward wayward Israel. He pursues the world as a husband pursues a wayward spouse so that the original relationship

between the two might be restored. Thus, salvation is not salvation "from Hell" but rescue "to covenantal relationship."

ROMANS 12.9-21: *AUTHENTIC LOVE*

The loving pursuit of God not only rescues people to covenantal relationship with God (1 John 3.1), but it also calls them to respond covenantally, a response expressed through the imitation of God's own loving character (1 John 3.16-18; 4.7, 19-21). Such a requirement is made possible through one's covenantal relationship with God (Galatians 5.22; Romans 5.5), but the expression of such love is foreign to people who have lived separated from God. Therefore, much of the practical teaching in the early Church focused on the forms one's covenantal relationship with God took when expressed horizontally.

In Romans 12, we find an extended teaching on the proper horizontal expression of covenantal love. Such an expression comes as obedience to God's will (Romans 12.2) and is rooted in the grace of God given to people (Romans 12.3-6). Simply put, what Paul is about to say is truly an imitation of God's character but not something people can do on their own. This becomes apparent from the first exhortation. Love must be sincere (authentic). The word Paul uses is a word which means without hypocrisy, or no faking allowed! The love expressed by people in imitation of God must be real and without pretense. This will require believers to inventory what they have "called" love, rejecting that which is not and leaning into that which truly is. According to Paul, real love is expressed to both believers and non-believers. This is not surprising as God's covenantal love is expressed to the world (John 3.16).

Love which is real and expressed to fellow believers is primarily that of devotion. This devotion is expressed in a desire to "out-honor" one another and is understood to be a spiritual act of service empowered by the Holy Spirit. This devotion remains strong and solid even in the most difficult of circumstances, expressing fidelity and devotion through constant prayer for one another and through the sharing of one's possessions.

Love which is real and expressed to non-believers is primary that of blessing, or the seeking of the good of the other. One might hear an echo of God's

blessing in this statement. Thus the good sought is God's good for the person. Such blessing is expressed by joining people in the highs and lows of life, refusing to separate oneself but being willing to be in relationship with all people, even though deemed to be lower. It is hard to miss echoes of the incarnation in these verses (Philippians 2.1-11). Such blessing is extended even in the face of evil, peace being sought and revenge being avoided. Rather than entering into cycles of violence and destruction, God's people replace evil with God, not as a means of shaming people but as a way of making room for God to deal with wayward people and creation in his way. It is hard to miss the echoes of God's redemptive mission through Christ (John 3.16-17) in these verses, love rather than judgment being given to wayward people.

REAL LIFE WITH BLAKE:

How do we engage our world? Followers of Christ have wrestled with this question for as long as the Church has existed. That we are to engage our world is plain. When we entered God's Kingdom through Christ we joined in God's redemptive mission. How to engage in this mission is the question. Growing up in a Southern Baptist context I thought the way you did this was to identify all that was wrong in the world and speak against it. When the world did not listen, you withdrew. So for example, when I was in seminary the Walt Disney Company issued a policy with which the Southern Baptist Convention did not agree. Pastors spoke against it and a "Disney is wrong" message went out from thousands of pulpits. When Disney didn't listen—they must have been out of town on that Sunday—the convention encouraged people to boycott Disney, to punish their lack of adherence by hitting them where it hurt, their pocketbook. Interestingly, that same policy still exists and I am sure more than a few Southern Baptists have never darkened the gates of Disney.

This is how I was taught it worked, but all I could see was that it didn't work. All that was happening was a bunch of Christians were getting worked up and a bunch of non-Christians were tuning out. Over the years, I have come to realize that this approach doesn't work because it isn't how it is supposed to work at all. When God began his redemptive mission it was rooted in love, a covenantal love which sought to woo a wayward world back to himself. OK. I get

that. What I have gotten only more recently is that those of us who respond to that redemptive mission take up that mission. . . in the same way. We carry on God's overtures of love, seeking to woo a wayward creation back. A love which woos doesn't shout, or condemn, or seek to hit people where it hurts. A love which woos does everything it can to seek the good of the other. It was this kind of love which drew me close and gave me ears to listen. It is this same love which can do the same in others today. So, maybe the reason Disney and so many others are not responding is because, I and others have not been loving.

REAL LIFE WITH YOU:

How do we engage our world? How did God do it? How is he doing it? God sought to engage our world with love. His redemptive mission in and through Christ is a mission of love. In Christ, God is seeking to woo the world back to himself. If that is how God is doing it, why would you or I do it differently? Perhaps we think that cries of denunciation and tantrums of rage are more powerful than love. Or maybe, we have found we simply do not know what it is to love. I suppose the latter is more likely the case. So, how do we learn to love our world? We learn not by trying harder or by reading books or taking classes. We learn to love by first receiving God's love. In Christ the fullness of God's love is demonstrated (Romans 5.8). When we allow ourselves to receive this love we come to understand how love approaches wayward and broken people with messy lives. Knowing this love experientially and personally, we are quickened in our ability to love others. This week, consider opening yourself to experience God's great love. You might do this in a way that best fits you, but I recommend using Scripture this week. Consider a passage like John 3.16-17 or Romans 5.6-8. Camp out on these verses this week, chewing on them. Read them out loud. Meditate upon them. Imagine them being acted out in your mind and see yourself as the recipient of God's great love. Allow God to love you and show you what it is to love.



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