

My son Jordan and I recently had a road trip to Seattle to see the Canadian celtic band Great Big C. It's a band we both really like. In fact my first Great Big C CD, was actually borrowed from my other son Luke. I don't think I ever returned it. Ooops. But really, when one of your kids says to you, "hey dad, what are you doing on Monday the (I forget the date). Great Big C is playing Seattle. I'll buy the tickets if you drive," there's only one response. But to be on the safe side, he enlisted Kelly's help to put on a little office pressure to make sure I said yes.

The day arrived and he brought with him his "phat tunes for road trips" cd that he burned years ago. I'd forgotten about it but there we were, driving to Seattle not listening to Great Big C, but Bon Jovi blasting from the Subaru. Talk about a picture of a time warp...baby boomer and his son driving down the freeway with rocker Bon Jovi blasting from a Subaru station wagon. Crazy. (Insert – it's my life...)

This ain't a song for the brokenhearted
No silent prayer for the faith departed
And I ain't gonna be just a face in the crowd
You're gonna hear my voice when I shout it out loud
It's my life
It's now or never
I ain't gonna live forever
I just wanna live while I'm alive
My heart is like an open highway
Like Frankie said, "I did it my way"
I just wanna live while I'm alive
'Cause it's my life

Bon Jovi makes my first point this morning. Live while you're alive. Make your life count for something. We cannot live someone else's life. We must live our own. We cannot make someone else's life count for something. We cannot live anyone else's agenda. We must live our own.

Murray Bowen, a pioneer in family therapy, calls this self-differentiation. It is to take responsibility for your own life, regardless of family of origin or social conditioning.

It is to understand that origin, to know our history, but it is to make decisions about what of that social conditioning still serves us and to discard that which doesn't. To be self-differentiated is to dance creatively between separation and togetherness. It is to develop, intentionally, at the same time, both autonomy and intimacy. In developing autonomy I set myself towards achieving my dreams and ambitions. In developing intimacy, I allow those close to me to see and know me as I really am.

My second point comes from the text Marion read for us this morning. I feel like I've said so many things about this text in my lifetime. In each reading, I hear things I've not heard before, I'm wondering if the same is true for you. We often hear this text at weddings or funerals, talking about what it means to love another person. We hone in on that middle section particularly – love is patient and kind, it is never jealous, or boastful or arrogant or rude, it does not insist on its own way, etc. We think it's a recipe for the perfect marriage.

That's not a bad thing necessarily. Marriages are incredible when they actually reflect this kind of intention. But that's not what Paul was writing about. He was not writing about marriage at all. He was writing to a Christian community, a church community not unlike our own; a community of diverse people, diverse perspectives of what it means to be church, a complex web of relationships that have their own power dynamics and their own version of parking lot conversations.

In this section of the letter, Paul is addressing the conflict over rank and position. The people of Corinth have written to ask who should be regarded as more important in the hierarchy of spiritual gifts. Like us, each of them brought to the table a host of gifts and talents in service to their vision of the future for the church. In the part Marion did not read, Paul says...all gifts are important, comparing gifts to the various parts of the body. All parts of the body are needed for the body to function. Not everyone can be teachers, or preachers, or prophets, or service providers. Not one gift is great than another. Rather, he calls the community to strive for the greater gifts...and says "I will show you a still more excellent way." That's how Marion started this morning. It's out of this context that Paul's writing on love emerges.

If I speak in the tongues of angels but do not have love but do not have love, I'm a noisy gong or a clanging symbol." The kind of love about which Paul was writing, was agape love...a distinctly Christian understanding of the word.

Outside of the Christian scriptures, the word agape appears in the bible only twice. Christians believe this agape love finds its source in the Divine Holy One we call God...the Creator. As the beloved creation of God, we cannot return this love to its source we can only give it to one another. It is a holy, self-less, unconditional love; and what's so interesting is that agape love often exists without affect.

Agape love doesn't come with great displays of emotion; no words of adoration or romance. Agape love is a love from God that is only known in the world when it is filtered through us, as we give it to others, by action, not affect. Loving in this way is what we do, regardless of how we feel. This is the spirit with which Paul calls the Christian to offer their gifts, however they have been gifted. Give them self-lessly.

Now it seems I've just offered a paradox...or certainly a contradiction. Bon Jovi sings, "It's my life," live your life with intention, live your life in your own way. Murray Bowen suggests we live that life in a dance between separation and togetherness. And yet Paul seems to call us to sacrificial living, that someone is more important than we are. What's it going to be Blair??

I don't see this as a contradiction at all. I see this as that balance between my being and my doing. I certainly agree with Bon Jovi, I'm going to live while I'm alive. I'm not going to just breathe and put one foot in front of the other. Every footstep will be taken with intention and with critical thought. For me, the critical thought is who am I in this step? How am I being? What is my authentic self?

"When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child; when I became an adult, I put an end to childish ways. For now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then (when love is realized, when we are self differentiated) we will see face to face. Now I know only in part; then I will know fully, (I will understand) even as I have been fully known. And now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love.

Paul is not saying don't be child like, he is calling us to be authentic, to be who YOU are, who I am, not what our social conditioning or family of origin say we should be. We must not let those things excuse us from discovering our authentic selves. And while that internal work is very difficult, I suggest this is the only place from which loving action can have no agenda.

When I discover who I am, I offer myself to the world intentionally, in agape love, expecting nothing in return. Loving in this way then is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. Loving in this way doesn't insist on its own way; it isn't irritable or resentful; it doesn't rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth. Loving in this way believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.

And this my dear friends, is our prayer of agape. Amen.