

Love is... and isn't Kendal Gibbons

One of the most famous passages on love is the thirteenth chapter of Paul's first letter to the church in Corinth, in which he describes what love is. But what isn't love?

Love is patient as opposed to people who rush to judgement; as opposed to those who insist that everybody should agree immediately on the obviously right answer, whether or not they have had time to think it through.

Love is kind as opposed to those who are willing for other people to suffer as long as they get their own way; as opposed to those who say everything they think without regard to how anyone else might feel.

Love does not envy as opposed to those who want to make sure they get credit for all they do; as opposed to those who like to say "I told you so."

Love is not proud as opposed to those who can never admit being wrong or needing help; as opposed to those who feel that their status or their contributions would privilege their ideas.

Love is not rude as opposed to those who interrupt, shout, or bully people with whom they disagree; as opposed to those who make sarcastic remarks, or pointedly stop speaking to someone who differs from them.

Love is not self-seeking as opposed to those who would impose their preferences on everyone; as opposed to those who would score points by taking advantage of someone else's weakness or trouble.

Love is not easily angered as opposed to those who find pleasure in their indignation; as opposed to those who are quick to take offence, for themselves or on behalf of others whether or not offense was intended.

Love keeps no record of wrongs as opposed to those who sulk, put, and nurture intentions to settle old scores.

Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth as opposed to those who whisper and insinuate; as opposed to those who routinely look for the worst rather than the best possible explanation for someone else's behavior or decision.

Love bears all things including the clumsiness and bad judgment and moral failures of those we love.

Love hopes all things including the promise of community and our potential for learning, growth and change.

Love endures all things including the pain of recognizing how we all fall short of the values we proclaim and our aspirations for community; including the delicate, tedious, awkward effort to make it right, picking up the pieces of covenant to try again.

Spiritual Economy

When I was ministering in England, I was contacted by the British General Assembly office in London and asked if I would be its representative at a weekend conference that was being held. I was geographically the closest, and especially as it was being held in a beautifully converted abbey, I said yes. The conference was being sponsored by an organization called MODEM, the clever acronym standing for Management and Organizational Development in Ministry. The purpose of this outfit was to bring the skills of management into closer harmony with ministry and, vice versa, to bring the values of ministry and faith into the workplace. I am interested in such things, so along I went.

It was a good conference, attended predominantly by Church of England vicars but with a smattering of Catholic priests, various Protestant clergy, and a couple of rabbis. I was the only Unitarian. And I learned some interesting things. One thing I learned, which did come as a surprise, was just how much Jesus had had to say about effective office management skills. But I figured these Christian ministers were better scholars of the Bible than I was, so they must be onto something.

But there were other things. Like, handle a piece of paper only once. You remember paper, don't you, and that quaint time when a person would actually walk up to your front door and give you these things called letters? Such an innocent time. Anyway, we were told we should handle a piece of paper only once. This was news to me. My modus operandi is to handle a piece of paper a dozen times. If I received a letter, then of course I would read it, but then I would decide that I should carefully ponder its import before I replied. So I would put the letter to one side, but then pick it up several times as I stumbled across it amidst the litter on my desk, and maybe I would read it again each time I handled it. When I could not put it off any longer I would finally write my reply, but by then I had forgotten the content of the letter so I would have to read it yet again. Then it would lie around on my desk for another week or so, getting in my way, covering that other piece of paper I was looking for, before I would eventually file it away. In such a way could a great many hours be happily wasted, keeping me from doing anything productive. But... handle a piece of paper only once? What a revelation!

Then there is filing. Or rather, there might be filing. I remember when I was a student for the minister, a senior colleague came and spent a whole day propounding the importance of index cards for everything - readings, sermon illustrations, references etc. We were instructed that we should keep index cards for everything - this was in pre-computer times, you understand. I am reliably informed that there are ministers who do have such neat filing systems, whether on index cards or now on computer. I sure don't.

I don't know how many wonderful readings or references I have come across in my almost forty years of preaching and I now have absolutely no idea what they were or where to find them. They are lost forever.

And lists. Let's not forget lists. I love making lists. Are you a list maker as well? I would come into my study on a Monday morning and make a list of everything I had to do that week. And then on subsequent mornings I would make a list of everything I had to do that day. Letters to write, calls to make, meetings to prepare for and attend, people to visit etc. Lots of chores would appear on successive lists - I didn't always get them all done on the day I initially thought I would - but at least they have been on the list. And it really is quite satisfying to cross something off the list. There are days when I have a page full of things to do, and at the end of the day every single one of them has been crossed out and I go home thinking I must have achieved something.

But my capacity for self-deception with lists is remarkable. I make my list, I work steadily through it, crossing off each thing as I go. But then I will do something not on the list. And you know what I do, don't you, because you probably do the same. After I have done something which was not on the list, I write it down so that I can have the satisfaction of crossing it off.

So anyway, my one involvement with this organisation, MODEM, was very useful, very helpful, and believe me, I can always use some assistance in learning the art of efficient management and administration. There are ministers who scorn the very idea of using the words ministry and management in the same sentence, who somehow think management is beneath their lofty spirituality. Not me. I would be glad to do some things better. And do more things in less time.

But two things I do know. The way to salvation is not through an efficiency drive. And being busy is not the same as accomplishing something worthwhile.

A company president was given a ticket for a performance of Schubert's Unfinished Symphony. Since she was unable to go, she passed the invitation to the company's Quality Assurance Manager. The next morning, the president asked him how he enjoyed it, and, instead of a few plausible observations, she was handed a memorandum which read as follows:

1. For a considerable period, the oboe players had nothing to do. Their number should be reduced, and their work spread over the whole orchestra, thus avoiding peaks of inactivity.
2. All twelve violins were playing identical notes. This seems unnecessary duplication, and the staff of this section should be drastically cut. If a large volume of sound is really required, this could be obtained through the use of an amplifier.

3. Much effort was involved in playing the demi-semiquavers. This seems an excessive refinement, and it is recommended that all notes should be rounded up to the nearest semiquaver. If this were done, it would be possible to use trainees instead of craftsmen.

4. No useful purpose is served by repeating with horns the passage that has already been handled by the strings. If all such redundant passages were eliminated, the concert could be reduced from two hours to twenty minutes.

5. The symphony had two movements. If Mr Schubert didn't achieve his musical goals by the end of the first movement, then he should have stopped there. The second movement is unnecessary and should be cut.

In light of the above, one can only conclude that had Schubert given attention to these matters, he probably would have had the time to finish his symphony.

Well, maybe he would have, but would anyone have wanted to listen to it?

The thing, of course, is this. Just as music is much more than the efficient arrangement of sounds, so living well, being present to the moment, is much more than the efficient management of time. As is living faithfully, living spiritually, living as if life matters far more than wasting our powers through getting and spending.

Isn't it curious? There is one thing I never put on my daily or weekly list of things to do. I never write - Do nothing. Yet, often, that is the more important thing I should be doing. Nothing.

You all know Bill Bryson, I am sure, the popular writer with his eccentric mix of travel and witty observation. In one of his books, I forget which one (see, if I had written it down on an index card I could have told you the book, the chapter, the page number, everything), in this book Bryson tells of an incident which happened once to him. He was living in Hanover, New Hampshire. He had abandoned Britain where he had lived for twenty years to return to his native land, and had chosen Hanover as the place to hang his hat. An excellent choice. Hanover is a delightful New England town. Anyway, late one afternoon he was beavering away at his computer, furiously writing something or other which he should have sent off days before. He was feeling oppressed by the deadline, and his son was calling to him to come outside and play catch.

I can't, I'm busy.

Come on, Dad.

I can't. I have to finish this piece.

Aw gee, Dad, come on.

Those of you who have been a parent, or for that matter a child, will recognize the exchange immediately. And for some reason, even though he really did have to meet that deadline, Bryson relented.

OK, I'm coming.

And he and his son went outside for an hour of playing catch. No big deal. It was something he had done a hundred times before with his son. Except that this time it was a big deal. It was a very big deal. It was a gorgeous, crisp late afternoon, with the brilliant sunlight filtering at a sharp angle through the dazzling hues of the New England foliage. The kind of New England day which does take your breath away. And there he was, playing catch with his son, doing what American Dads have done for generations, the simple rhythmic bonding of throwing and catching a baseball to and fro.

And Bryson was overwhelmed. Overwhelmed with the beauty of it, the wonder of it, the appreciation for the miracle of being alive and so blessed, that there he was amidst the glory of creation, doing something elemental with his son. It was an afternoon to scour in the memory for a lifetime, so perfect was it, so vivid to all his senses, and most especially to his sense of joy.

But, you know what, says Bryson? I nearly missed it. I nearly missed it by thinking that hunching over my computer was more important. Writing words that I, and anybody who might read them, would soon forget, compared with that magical moment with my son which I will never forget. I was almost too busy making a living to be aware of what it means to be alive.

If you never look up, how are you going to see the sunsets? If you never stop, how are you going to smell the flowers? If you never pause to give thanks, how are you going to know how much you have to give thanks for?

There is no such thing as being too busy to stop. Usually it is not that we are too busy to stop, but that we have forgotten how. Or that we are afraid of the stillness. Saying no to the rush, stepping off the carousel on which everyone else is mindless going around and around, takes a lot more courage and self-confidence that might be imagined.

There is the story of the priest who prayed faithfully for an hour every morning. That hour of prayer in the morning, he explained, put him into the right frame of mind for the rest of the day. Except, of course, when he had a particularly busy and frantic day ahead of him and he didn't have time. Then he did not begin by praying for an hour. He began by praying for two hours.

You don't need me to tell you all the things on your daily or weekly lists, you don't need me to tell you that life can be busy and hectic and how the joy of it all can drain away in the weariness of work to be done. But remember, the life of the spirit is not subject to time and motion study experts. It is often not the more you do, but the less you do, which is important.

I am not telling you to be lazy. Goodness knows, the world needs your energy, it needs your passion, your involvement and your commitment. But it is a reminder that we neglect our spirits at our peril, and we cannot tend our spirits if our shoulder is always to the wheel. Tending to your spirit requires time, it requires focus, it requires attention.

So don't just do something, sit there. Waste time. It might be the best thing you can do with it.

But here is a question. Suppose the next time I write down my list of things to do, I put on it, Do Nothing. How much nothing will I have to do before I am allowed to cross it off?