

A Sermon by Alex Evans
Blacksburg Presbyterian Church, Blacksburg, VA
From Sunday, November 2, 2008
Text: I Corinthians 13

“Be Swift to Love, Make Haste to be Kind”

This is the second sermon in a brief series on the benediction used by Alex Evans at the close of worship each Sunday in Blacksburg:

“Life is short. We do not have much time to gladden the hearts of those who travel the way with us. Be swift to love; make haste to be kind, that God’s love and light, peace and joy, justice and hope, can be for you and for all people everywhere. Amen”

There is a movie out, playing in the cinemas these days, called Religulous. The title of this movie comes from the combination of two words – religion and ridiculous. So you can imagine a little about the content, even if you have not heard about this movie.

Comedian Bill Maher, who is famous for his show on HBO, – “Real Time with Bill Maher” – and who proudly claims no faith, put together this movie. He poses as himself, attempts to act as a journalist, pretends that he is unbiased, and goes around the world interviewing people about faith. So this movie is a kind of documentary. Maher asks people questions from the extreme – do you really believe in a talking snake? Could someone really be swallowed by a whale and live? If Jesus is supposed to come back one day and set everything right, bringing peace and hope, why doesn’t he do it now? How can anyone believe this stuff? These are his questions.

I can often find humor in Bill Maher and his comedy. I even agree with much of his politics. But this movie mostly makes me sad. It makes me sad because it indicates that we, as people of faith, have too often focused on the wrong things and left many people with a bad impression of Christianity, or Islam, or Judaism. It reminds me that we have much work to do. Sure, our religion can appear ridiculous, especially to pundits and people who are out to make it look bad. But this movie also reminds us that our calling to follow Jesus in the ways of loving God and loving neighbor is that much more urgent in our culture and around the world.

I can agree with Bill Maher that religion has caused many problems and made many messes through the years. I can agree with Maher that there are many who give a very bad name to religion. When Pat Robertson said on his Christian television show on August 22, 2005 that Hugo Chavez, President of Venezuela, should be assassinated, that is an affront to all Christians. When religious fanatics of any faith bomb buildings, or explode themselves in crowded streets, or fly airplanes into skyscrapers, or justify war by using God’s name – and Muslims, Christians and Jews have all done that - that is an affront to all who seek to live by faith. There is no doubt that religion can look more like evil than good. It is too often hatred, not love that guides people of faith. It is too often vengeance, not prayerful humility that guides people of faith. It is too often righteous

indignation, not kindness and meekness and patience that guides faithful people. So we are indeed open to Bill Maher's criticisms and disdain.

Why is it that we seem so good at hating and alienating, when all the great religions call us over and over again to be people of love? Why is it that we are so adept at judging and condemning others not like us, when Jesus calls us over and over again to love, to extend ourselves toward one another? Why is it that we seem so good at hoarding and holding grudges, scheming and plotting pain, when we know very well that God calls us to do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with our God?

Indeed, if "religulous" shows us anything, it is how much work we have to do to spread love and kindness in our hurting world.

Our Scripture lesson today is so beautiful and so poetic. Paul says, "I want to lay out a far better way for you. If I speak with human eloquence and angelic ecstasy but don't love, I am nothing but the creaking of a rusty gate. If I speak God's word with power, revealing all God's mysteries and making everything plain as day, and if I have faith that says to a mountain "Jump!" and it jumps, but I don't love, I am nothing. If I give away everything I own to the poor and even go to the stake to be burned as a martyr but don't love, I have gotten nowhere. So no matter what I say, what I believe, what I do, I am bankrupt without love." (The Message)

These words from Paul offer a powerful message for us in these days when we are so politically polarized. Do you think we can each embody more love and kindness in this election week? Do you think we can see beyond the placards and signs, and listen beyond the disagreements, and help to promote a more loving world? Do you think we might put divisions aside and work for a future and a hope through love and kindness?

This poetry from Paul is a really important word for us in these days when we see so many people alienated from one another – in marriages, in families, in towns, between nations, around the world. One of my favorite pieces of historic literature comes from one of the earliest descriptions of Christians from Tertullian in the 2nd century: "it is our care for the helpless, our practice of lovingkindness, that brands us in the eyes of our opponents. "Look," they say, "How they love one another! Look how they are prepared to die for one another." That is who Christians are to be. Shouldn't we be defined this way, instead of by our alienation, our anxiety, our absurdity, our self-righteousness?

This is what Paul is pushing so hard in so many of his writings. He is calling us as followers of Jesus to a way of life characterized by love. With vivid language and conviction, he says that nothing else matters – not intellect, not eloquence, not power and prestige, not impressive credentials, not even faith matters, not even good works, if it does not include love. Love is it! This is what characterizes those who follow Jesus. This is what life is about finally. Make love your aim. Go after a life of love as if your very life depended on it – because it does. This is what matters! "Be swift to love, make haste to be kind."

People asked Jesus – what is the greatest commandment? You all know the answer: love! Love God with all you have and all you are. Love your neighbor as you love yourself. Paul echoes what Jesus said. Faith, hope, love – these three – but the greatest of these is love.

Shane Claiborne is a Christian who is becoming increasingly important in my own life and thinking about living the Christian way. And Shane is certainly not one to shy away from stirring things up. Here is one comment from Shane about love. “It is pretty easy to depersonalize the poor so we don’t feel responsible for the catastrophic failure that results in so many people sleeping on the streets while so many others have spare bedrooms in their homes. We can volunteer in a social program or distribute excess food and clothing through organizations and still never have to open our homes (or really open our hearts.) When we get to heaven, we will be separated into those sheep and goats Jesus talks about in Matthew 25 based on how we cared for the least among us.” And Shane says, “I am just not convinced that Jesus is going to say, ‘When I was hungry, you gave a check to the (church) and they fed me’ or ‘when I was naked, you gave your clothes to the Salvation Army and they clothed me.’ Jesus is not seeking distant acts of charity. Jesus is seeking concrete acts of love: you fed me...you visited me ... you welcomed me into your home... you clothed me.” (see Claiborne, Irresistible Revolution, p. 158)

Friends, life is short. Our lives are to model the new reign of God that is alive and intended for all – a community where people are reconciled, where love abounds, where life is full of joy and vitality not violence and condemnation. Paul says, “make love your aim.” We keep saying – “be swift to love, make haste to be kind.” This is the way to life, to transformation, to hope, to peace. Are we real Christians? We are when we love. We are when we realize that it is not about fancy language or angelic ecstasies, but about love. We are when we vote with love, and work for love, and remain sincere in spreading kindness. All these things are so counter-cultural, and so needed in our world! “We do not have much time to gladden the hearts of those who travel the way with us. Be swift to love; make haste to be kind.” It is not about being smart or figuring out things or being in charge – it is about love. It is not even about faith that removes mountains – it is about love. Be swift to love. Make haste to be kind. This is the Jesus way. And we have much work to do – along with all other people of faith – to promote Jesus’ love and kindness, light and hope all around our world.

Today we gather around the Lord’s table. We come to this table to remember Jesus who comes to us, who loves us, who feeds us, who calls to new ways of living and loving. This is food for the journey. This is sustenance for our souls. This is bread and cup that intends to keep us on track in living with and for God – in love, in kindness, in faithfulness. We come to this table to be strengthened in our lives of love. May this food and these moments change us for deeper love and more faithful devotion as God’s loving disciples. Amen

Prayer: Holy God, help us to live swift to love, with haste in sharing kindness, as if our life depended on it. We know it does. Amen

This sermon was preached during morning worship at Blacksburg Presbyterian Church, Blacksburg, VA on Sunday, November 2, 2008 by Alex Evans, Pastor. This is a rough manuscript.