

Love embodied: Bob Sheridan

Luke 1:46-55

December 12, 2010

God loved the world. God loved the world so much that he gave the world his Son. God gave the world his Son in order that everyone -- anyone -- who believes in his Son will not die, but have life! This is love embodied.

The Word, God's Word, the Word that was God, became a human being, flesh and blood. The Word became a human being and lived among us, lived as one of us, full of grace and truth! This is love embodied.

Christ Jesus had in himself the full nature of God. He had the full nature of God in himself, but he chose not to take advantage of that privilege. Instead, he gave up everything, choosing instead to live the life of a servant. He lived the life of a servant and followed the path of obedience all the way, all the way to death, all the way to his death on the cross. This is love embodied.

God is love. Jesus is love embodied. Jesus is love embodied, not love that is mere words or lovely thoughts or warm feelings, but love that shows itself in practical acts of selflessness and generosity.

This is love embodied ...

... healing a man disfigured by leprosy, but first -- first! -- reaching out to touch him, reaching out to touch this body that everyone, even the man himself, considered repulsive and untouchable.

... stopping to strike up conversation with a woman, a Samaritan woman, an immoral Samaritan woman, a woman used to being shunned and despised and deemed worthless by men like Jesus.

... forcibly removing swindlers and hucksters from the Temple of the Lord, because that too is an act of love, acting out of love for God, defending God's honor, and acting out of love for God's people who come to the temple to be healed, not to be bilked.

... choosing to go to Jerusalem when he knew what awaited him there, choosing to suffer arrest, to suffer humiliation, to suffer rejection, to suffer death, for the very sake of those who arrested him and shamed him and abandoned him and killed him.

... asking Peter, Peter who disowned him and betrayed him after he swore he never would, asking Peter three times, "Do you love me?," giving Peter the chance to say three times, "Yes, Lord, I do love you," one time for every time Peter had denied him, giving Peter the chance to reclaim his love for Jesus, giving Peter the chance to restore his dignity.

Jesus is love embodied, and as followers of Jesus, we are called to do the same, to embody love. It's that simple. What we are called to do is not at all complicated or mysterious. I didn't say it is easy, but it's not complicated.

Love is not complicated. Love means simply this: putting another's needs and welfare and desires before your own. Loving God with all your heart simply means putting God's desires, God's will, before your own. Loving your neighbor simply means putting your neighbor's needs and welfare before your own. It's that simple.

Bob Sheridan was a simple man, and I mean that in the best possible sense. His passions were intense and unwavering and few:

- his wife, his children, his grandchildren;
- catching trout (Notice I did not say, "fishing for trout." I fish for trout.

Bob caught trout!);

- playing games of chance and sharing the winnings;
- and his church, and Jesus.

My, how Bob loved Jesus! Bob's love for Jesus was simple and straightforward and in no way complicated. He and Donna regularly attended my Bible studies, but Bob was no fan of hard questions or difficult dilemmas or discussions leaving loose ends. He knew what he knew ... and he did it!

He did it! Bob loved Jesus and showed he loved Jesus by loving like Jesus. Like Jesus, Bob Sheridan embodied love. Like Jesus, Bob chose to live the life of a servant: opportunity by opportunity, situation by situation, person by person. Person by person, because love is always personal, never general, never generic. You can't be loving. You love somebody.

Bob gave out fish, and he gave out hugs. He provided rides to people who couldn't drive, and he visited people who were sick and lonely. He befriended people who had few friends, and he defended people who had few defenders,

Bob was a tireless advocate for an improved sound system in our sanctuary for the sake of those who need to hear, and Bob was a tireless advocate for evangelism for the sake of those who need to hear!

I have given you an impressive list of the ways Bob Sheridan embodied love, but, really, I don't know the half of it! I know what I saw him do. I know what he did for me, as you do, too! But none of us know all of it.

None of us know all of it because Bob always acted "under the radar," in quiet, low profile ways, in ways almost invisible except to those he served. There was never any fanfare, never any attempt to draw attention to himself, never any big show of public generosity. The love Bob embodied was simple, humble, slow, steady, persistent, indiscriminate, and always without recognition, always without reward.

No, I'm sorry, that's wrong. There was a reward. There is a reward, the reward of God's own approbation: "Well done, you good and faithful servant!"

You received in the mail this week Craig Driver's Christmas letter, written on behalf of our Deacons' Fund. I hope you read it! In the letter, Craig writes, "Justice, peace, and love are not passive; they sprout and grow when we serve each other." In other words, justice and peace and love sprout and grow when they are embodied. Justice and peace and love must be embodied, otherwise they mean nothing. Bob Sheridan embodied love. He embodied love by serving us, by serving his neighbors whoever they happened to be.

In his letter, Craig elaborates what this service will entail. It will mean turning the world upside down. Justice turns the world upside down by reining in oppression and setting free the oppressed. Peace turns the world upside down by changing enemies into friends. And love turns the world upside down by lifting up the lowly and pulling down the high and mighty.

That's the message of Mary's song in the gospel of Luke.

*My heart praises the Lord;
my soul is glad because of God my Savior,
for he has remembered me, his lowly servant!*

In her own experience, Mary recognizes the wonder of God's love, the love that remembers a humble young woman, the love that gives her life meaning, the love that brings her blessing, the love that brings her blessing by allowing her to be the vehicle of bringing blessing into the world!

And Mary recognizes her experience as emblematic of what God's love always does and always will do.

*From one generation to another
[God] shows mercy to those who honor him.
He has stretched out his mighty arm
and scattered the proud with all their plans.*

*He has brought down mighty kings from their thrones,
and lifted up the lowly.
He has filled the hungry with good things,
and sent the rich away with empty hands.*

God's love lifts the lowly and fills the hungry. And God's love brings down the mighty and sends the rich away empty-handed.

Both the lifting up and the pulling down are acts of love. Turning the world upside down is an act of love for the benefit of people on both ends of the world's social and economic spectrum. It is not just the lowly, but the proud too who need to be saved from aimless lives. It is not just the poor, but the rich too who need to be freed from the power of things to rob them of life.

When the rich man came to Jesus and asked him, "What must I do to receive eternal life?," Jesus looked straight at him with love and said ...

Love may be tender. Love may be tough. Love may be merciful. Love may be demanding. Love may tell us what we've been longing to hear. Love may tell us what we dread to hear. And, sometimes, love may not say anything at all, simply leaving us room to see what we need to see, to understand what we need to understand, to do what we need to do.

But love, the kind of love that means something, the kind of love that comes from God, is always embodied. Love is in the details. Love is in the day-to-day. Love is in the nitty-gritty. Love is in the relationships, one by one by one: noticing, remembering, esteeming, serving. Bob Sheridan embodied this kind of love, and his example impels us to do the same, to love Jesus by loving like Jesus.

But Bob would readily admit what we need to remember, too, that in the end what matters is not how much we love, but how much we are loved.

We love because God first loved us.

God loves us so much that God gave us his Son in order that every one of us who believes in his Son will not die -- will not die! -- but will have life. This is love embodied.