

What's Love Got to Do With it & The Giving Tree - by Shawn Evelyn. 10.27.19

Once upon a time, there was a tree and she loved a little boy much more than she loved herself. When the boy was younger he would eat her apples, swing from her branches, climb up her trunk, and make a crown from her leaves and pretend that he was the King of the forest, and she was happy. But the boy got older, and did not have time for the tree like he used to. After a long time the boy came back, and visited the tree. The tree was so happy to see him and said, "eat my apples, swing from my branches, climb up my trunk and have fun like before." The boy said, "I don't have time to do those things anymore, I want to have fun, but I need money to have fun, do you have any money?" The tree thought about it and said, "I can't give you money, but you can take my apples, sell them in the city and folks can pay you for them, then you will have money." The boy gathered her apples and sold them in the city and the tree was happy. More time passed, and the boy came back. The tree was so happy to see him and said, "swing from my branches, climb up my trunk and have fun like you used to." The boy even older now said, "I don't have time for any of that. I have a wife now and we are about to have kids, we live in the city and want a house, can you give me a house?" The tree thought about it and said, "I can't give you a house, but you can cut off my branches and build yourself a house." So the boy did, he cut down her branches, gathered them, and made a house with it, and the tree was happy. More time passed, and the boy came back, the tree was so happy to see him and said, "climb up my trunk and have fun like you used to." The boy even older now said, "I can't, life has been too hard, I just want to get in a boat and sail away, do you have a boat?" The tree thought about it and said, "I can't give you a boat, but you can use my trunk to build yourself a boat, and that can take you where you want to go." The boy did just that, he cut down her trunk, built himself a boat and sailed away and the tree was happy. Much more time passed, the tree was

now nothing more than a stump, but she saw the boy one last time. He was hunched over and very old. The tree said to him, "I am sorry, but I don't have anything else to give you. I don't have any apples for you to eat." The boy said, "apples are too much for my teeth to handle." The tree said, "I don't have anymore branches for you to swing on anymore." The boy said, "I am too old to swing on branches." "Even my trunk is gone said the tree," the boy said, "I am too tired to climb." The tree said, "I'm sorry, I don't have anything else to give to you I am just a stump." The boy said, "that's alright, I don't have need of anything these days, I just need a place to rest." The tree was delighted and said, "I don't have much but I am able to give you rest, come, come and sit on my stump and rest," and the boy did, and the tree was happy.

For most of you, you have spent the last couple of weeks in your small groups trying to figure out Paul and what he has been going through in his letter to the church in Corinth. God's Wisdom and being foolish, being known by God, Spiritual Gifts, being of One Body, and now Love. Well Faith, Hope, and Love, but it is apparent even the scripture is saying that the greatest of these is Love. It may seem a bit on the nose, but this reading from 1 Corinthians cannot be heard without thinking about weddings. We might think about weddings because its language can be seen as romantic and it is one of the most popular readings for weddings, even for weddings that don't ascribe to any particular denomination because it does not mention God or our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

Whats love, got to do with it? Love is presented to us a Spiritual Gift. If you recall Chapter 12 of 1 Corinthians, Paul gives us information on those Spiritual Gifts, gifts of healing, gifts of prophecy, the working of miracles, and the gifts of tongues and all of these gifts are made possible through the Spirit. From there we hear about the body and how one thing cannot

work without another and how all parts of said body are important and have their own special place.

The story that you heard from when I began is from a book called *The Giving Tree*, by Shel Silverstein. It was one of my favorite books growing up. I would always think about the tree and how she gave without question to someone else, and was always happy despite losing a bit of herself in the process. To me, that tree is love and not only love, the love that Paul is trying to get across in his letter. The concept of love here is not an ideology nor is it romantic, but an expression of Christian life. It is broken down in 3 parts, the first couple of verses lets us know that without love Spiritual gifts are nothing. If I don't have love, then this, if I don't have love then that, if I don't have love then... fill in the blank. The second portion, lets us know that love acts in distinctive ways, love is patient, love is kind, etc. etc. And finally, the gifts that are not love that we might think we value, are temporary, but it is love lasts into a new age, an age that has already begun in the risen Lord Jesus Christ.

I want to remind everyone that in the ancient Greek, there are different definitions of Love and how Love is used. The version of Love used here in 1 Corinthians, is *agape*, a self-offering love, not to be confused with self-sacrifice, but a self-offering which is done without expecting anything in return and which does not harm the one that is self-offering. I like to believe the Tree of the story represents Love, and the boy is a representation of the people of Corinth. There was a time of peace and all was well and Paul didn't need to intervene. This was when the boy was young. Then the boy got older, and with age came knowledge of worldly things which eventually turned into needs that benefited the self, resulting in living for status, being the smartest, being puffed up. In the story, there was a need for a different kind of fun, the

belief that fun can only be achieved with money, but that was not always the case. Then there was a need to raise a family and believing a house was needed to be successful. Then there was a need to get away, when life gets too hard, the boy desires to sail off, leave everything and everyone behind, and run away. The people of Corinth were of like mind. As time passed, they gained knowledge of things that benefited themselves and gave up on living for their community, living for each other, living for what Christ had left them. These people were more worried about how they were seen, their status, their jobs in the church and so on, to the point where there was infighting, distrust, and the escape of the Christian life for which they came together to live.

This thinking is presented to us in our Gospel reading for today, the Pharisee and the Tax Collector. Jesus tells a parable of two men, both who were not the models for Christian life, but were used nonetheless to teach us Christianity. One was a misguided religious leader, who yes was doing some good things; he fasted and even tithed. The problem is this religious leader separated himself from the people around him, his community, boasted of himself, and clearly did those right things for the wrong reasons. The other took money from the poor and used some of those funds to line his pockets as tax collectors were known to do at the time. His attempt at repentance however was different as he acknowledged his faults, humbled himself, and was truly genuine about it. We can see that in the face of any wrongdoing we own up to, without Love, without a genuine offering up of ourselves, it's not worth much.

It's hard to be the tree in the story. It seems like there is so much pressure to bear fruit and then just to give it away. To grow strong and upright only to have your branches and your trunk cut off for something that won't last. It's hard to be stripped bare of all we have and of who

we are and not receive a single thank you and be happy about it all. It's hard to be a Christian, and to live in community because most times, those things will happen and we have to act accordingly . If 1 Corinthians, and our small groups have taught us anything, it's that we are living in community, what we do has to be done with Love so that it can mean something, so that it can be worth it, because all other things pass away. Love is the glue, the base, the foundation, and so much more.

Remember the tree even though just a stump, truly it did so much to give, but more than the boy it actually lived.

Amen.