

Teaching God's Love in Action

[Views, experiences and practices]

- Helen R. Graham, M.M.

Good afternoon to fellow educators one and all! A belated Happy World

Teacher's Day to each one of you!

I shall begin with an excerpt from *The Prophet* by the Lebanese-American author Khalil Gibran:¹

Then said a teacher, "Speak to us of Teaching."

And he said:

No [one] can reveal to you aught but that which already lies half asleep in the dawning of our knowledge.

The teacher who walks in the shadow of the temple, among his followers, gives not of his wisdom but rather of his faith and his lovingness.

If he is indeed wise he does not bid you enter the house of wisdom, but rather leads you to the threshold of your own mind. . . .

For the vision of one [person] lends not its wings to another. . .

And even as each one of you stands alone in God's knowledge, so must each one of you be alone in [your] knowledge of God and in [your] understanding of the earth.

You have been expanding your horizons and creating an impact for three days now. Sharing your best practices and innovations in learning

¹Khalil Gibran, *The Prophet* <http://leb.net/mira/main.html>. Had to leave most of the sexist language as is.

and teaching and interacting with visionary teachers in education from the Philippines, other parts of Asia, South Africa, Finland, the United States, and elsewhere. Rose Bautista e-mailed me fifty pages of abstracts on Tuesday---I was overwhelmed! Now it is the last day and two-thirty on a Friday afternoon. You will understand why I feel extremely challenged at this moment!

In my free moments I have been pondering on this topic. The more I ponder the more I feel the enormity of the task. I think the title given me for this talk is a spin-off from the slogan of the Maryknoll Sisters: *Making God's Love Visible*. This talk has forced me to face that slogan and think seriously about it!

Our Founder, Mother Mary Joseph, often spoke of the Maryknoll Spirit as being

a reflection of the love of God,
nothing more nor less than that,
a reflection of the love of God. (*MMJ: 1932*)

In the quotation of our founder the phrase “a reflection of the love of God” is repeated twice for emphasis. The Maryknoll sister is to be “a reflection of the love of God,” no more, no less!

Sounds simple, but what exactly do we mean by “the love of God?”

And how does one teach it? How does one reflect it? Does one teach

God’s love simply by one’s action? Is the action of teaching itself a

possible way of communicating God’s love? What exactly is God’s love?

And how does one know if one is indeed teaching it in action? I would

wake up in the wee hours of the morning asking myself about teaching the

love of God in action!

What is Love?

It seems we must first come to some understanding of this word “love” itself; this word that is used and abused daily. We all talk about it, we all desire it, we all try to live it, but do we really know what it is?

The psychologist Erich Fromm defines love as “an activity, not a passive affect; it is a ‘standing in,’ not a ‘falling for.’” Fromm continues by explaining that

the active character of love can be described by stating that love is primarily *giving*, not receiving. . . . Giving is the highest expression of potency [power]. In the very act of giving, I experience my strength, my wealth, my power. This expression of heightened, vitality and potency fills me with joy. I experience myself as overflowing, spending, alive. . . Giving is more joyous than

receiving, not because it is a deprivation, but because in the act of giving lies the expression of my aliveness.²

Fromm is speaking of love in general. Basically he says that love is an art that involves going beyond myself. “Giving,” he says “is the highest expression of potency.” In giving I experience and express my aliveness.

Rabbi Lawrence Kushner in his book *God was in this place and I, i did not know* writes “[t]he opposite of love is not hate but self-love. Indeed the paradox of loving seems to be that you get bigger from making yourself smaller. Love cannot be acquired but only given. The love you give is the love you have. And the more people you love, the more love you have.”³

These reflections on love open the way to speak of *God’s* love as God, it seems to me, is the quintessential giver; the quintessential lover.

How does one speak of God’s love?

How does one speak of God’s Love? Indeed, how does one speak of God at all? God is like thought which Khalil Gibrah describes as “a bird of space that, in a cage of words, may unfold its wings, but cannot fly”⁴

² Erich Fromm, *The Art of Loving* (Harper and Row Publishers, Inc., New York, 1974) 18-19, as cited by Harvey J. Fields, *A Torah Commentary for Our Times*. Vol III: Numbers and Deuteronomy (New York: UAHC Press, 1993) 113.

³ Lawrence Kushner, *God was in this place & I, i did not know: Finding Self, Spirituality and Ultimate Meaning* (Woodstock, Jewish Lights Publishing, 2000⁶), 52.

⁴ Khalil Gibran, *The Prophet* <http://leb.net/mira/main.html>.

Indeed God is beyond thought and words. God is Holy Mystery who cannot be captured by the human mind or contained in human language. But as humans we have no other option but to use our finite language to speak of the infinite.

The Bible is, one might say, simply the story of God's love affair with humankind. A love affair that continues, in one way or another, in each of our lives, regardless of the particular religious expression we give to it. In the Bible God is spoken of in the more familiar metaphors as King, shepherd, Father and less familiarly as husband, as woman in labor and, perhaps a bit shockingly, as consummate lover.

The mystics, whether they were Jewish *Kabbalists*, Christian mystics, or Muslim sufis, all used the analogy of human love, expressed in the relationship of a man and a woman, to image the love of God. The Bible contains a book of erotic love poems entitled *The Song of Songs* that is chanted in synagogues weekly on the eve of the Sabbath and especially on the feast of Passover. There is nothing in the Bible that compares with the detailed development of the man-woman relationship that we find in this poetry. Only here do we find God speaking to Israel as follows

(*Song*, 7:1-3):

How graceful are your feet in sandals,
O queenly maiden!
Your rounded thighs are like jewels,
The work of a master hand.
Your navel is a rounded bowl
That never lacks mixed wine,
Your belly is a heap of wheat,
Encircled with lilies.
Your two breasts are like two fawns,
Twins of a gazelle.

Or Israel addressing God in these words (*Song* 5:10-12)?

My beloved is all radiant and ruddy,
Distinguished among ten thousand.
His head is the finest gold;
His locks are wavy,
Black as a raven.
His eyes are like doves
Beside springs of water,
Bathed in milk, fitly set.

The literary critic, Robert Altar writes:

The experience of love is enacted through the body, and the *Song* celebrates the body as few other poems, ancient or modern, have done. But though love manifests itself in bodily impulse, it is also conceived here as an abiding force that transcends the body, a force that cannot be bribed, bought, extorted, deflected by public censure, or prompted to exert its power before it is ripe. In a poem that never mentions God's name, love provides access to a kind of divinity.⁵

⁵ Material taken from xeroxed notes of a seminar on *The Song of Songs* led by Maureen Fritz, NDS and Jack Driscoll, CFC held at the Institute of Formation and Religious Studies (IFRS) the summer of 2002.

How does one speak of the Love of God? The 16th century Carmelite mystic, John of the Cross (1542-1591), paraphrases the *Song of Songs* in his *Spiritual Canticle*:

Where have you hidden,
Beloved, and left me moaning?
You fled like the stag
After wounding me:
I went out calling you, and you were gone.

And the medieval reformer and mystic Bernard of Clairvaux writes of the *Song of Songs*:

If anyone desires to grasp these writings,
Let him love! For anyone who does
not love, it is vain to listen to this song
of love—or to read it, for a cold heart
cannot catch fire from its eloquence. . . .
the language of love will be meaningless jangle,
like sounding brass or tinkling cymbal,
to anyone who does not love.⁶

How, then, does one speak of the Love of God? The poetry of Hafiz, the fourteenth century Sufi poet/mystic, expresses it well:

Someone Should Start Laughing

I have a thousand brilliant lies
For the question
How are you?

I have a thousand brilliant lies

⁶ Sermon 79, 1.

For the question
What is God?

If you think that the Truth can be known
From words,

If you think that the Sun and the Ocean
Can pass through that tiny opening
Called the mouth,

O someone should start laughing!

Someone should start wildly Laughing—
Now!

How *does* one speak of the love of God? We are all caught in the limitations of language and thought---God's love, after all is enveloped in Holy Mystery, beyond our ability to comprehend---indeed the sun and the ocean cannot pass through the tiny opening called mouth! But, in spite of these human limitations, we are commanded by scripture to the love of God and neighbor. In response to a scribe's question about the greatest commandment, Jesus, citing two Old Testament passages, replied:

The first is,

'Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one; you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength.'

The second is this,

'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.'

There is no other commandment greater than these (Mark 12:30-31).

As teachers, teaching is one significant way through which we can manifest God's love in Action.

Teaching: God's Love in Action?

Our founder said that the Maryknoll Spirit was "a reflection of the Love of God, nothing more nor less than that, a reflection of the love of God." In the words of the poet Reiner Maria Rilke,

You, sent out beyond your recall,
Go to the limits of your longing,
Embody me
(from: *Love Poems to God*)

I have been teaching Sacred Scripture in the Philippines for forty-four years now. I would like to think that my teaching, in some way embodies God, reflects God's love in action. But that is not for me to judge.

Teaching, as you all know so well, is done in many situations---all of us are, in one way or another, teaching. I happen to be involved in formal education of seminarians and young religious and lay persons. My vocation and training is as a student of the Sacred Scripture. That is my passion. That is the sphere where I am supposed to make God's love visible,

The setting of my teaching is multicultural. My students are from such places as China, Korea, Vietnam, Myanmar, Thailand, Indonesia, Papua New Guinea, Pakistan, Bangladesh, India, Malaysia, Congo, Kenya and of course, the Philippines! Our students are exposed to different languages, cultures and foods. It is a significant part of their learning experience. Standing in the classroom and looking out at the multiplicity of cultures that face me, I cannot help but be moved by the beauty of the diversity of those created in God's image! It is a great opportunity to exert some influence in Asia without even leaving my classroom!

There is a Talmudic legend the message of which has significance for us as teachers. This story is one of the classic tales from the Talmud (Ta'anit 23a).

Honi Ha-Meagel (the Circlemaker)

Honi Ha-Meagel (the Circlemaker) was a pretty famous man in his own time. People said that he was so close to God he was practically family. . . .

One day Honi took a walk. He felt proud of himself, and he liked the fact that everyone knew him.

He came across a man who was planting a carob tree. "Hey there," he called out. "Tell me," said Honi. "This carob tree that you're planting, how long will it take until it grows carobs?"

The man scratched his head and looked at Honi.

"Well, it'll take 70 years until this tree grows fruit," he said.

"What a waste of time," said Honi. "You'll never eat from this tree. Why bother planting it?"

"Oh, I don't know," said the tree planter. "I'm not planting this for myself. I'm planting it for my children and their children."

"Life is too short," laughed Honi, and walked on his way.

Honi suddenly felt tired, oh so tired. He saw a nice shady rock, lay down behind it and fell asleep. He slept really soundly. In fact - he didn't know it - but he slept for 70 years.

When he woke up, he felt so refreshed, but he didn't realize he had slept so long. He started walking home, and he chanced upon the same tree. Only suddenly, it was giant. And a man was picking the carob fruit from the tree.

"Hey there," called Honi. "Are you the man who planted this tree?"

"Are you kidding," said the man. "This tree was planted by my grandfather."

Honi was taken aback.

He realized that he must have slept for years and years. In his sleep, life had blossomed around him. And he finally came to understand how important it was to plant for the next generation.⁷

As teachers we are planting for the next generation. Most of the time the teacher will not see the result of her teaching in her lifetime. Teaching requires commitment and a willingness to live in faith, a willingness to wait for results and maybe not see them at all. One of the joys of having

⁷http://www.jewishexponent.com/article/2405/A_Tu_BShevat_Story_for_the_Ages/

taught in the same institute for almost forty-four years, is you live long enough to have your students become your colleagues, even your dean!

Learning as an entry into the Divine

There is a rabbinic saying the author of which I have forgotten “when you pray you talk to God, when you study God talks to you” Study and prayer in Judaism are two sides of the same coin.

One practice I have found extremely rewarding in my teaching is the rabbinic method of study called *havrutah*. The word is taken from the Aramaic for friend, *haver*. Havrutah may be defined as “paired study and focused conversation around classical Jewish texts.”⁸ *Havrutah* is not confined to religious texts, however, but

it is an ambitious and powerful pedagogy for teachers and learners in different educational contexts. People generally think of havruta as two people studying Jewish texts, but . . . havruta is much more than that, involving three partners: two people and the text over which they come together. . . . This theory may also be a helpful lens for both studying and elucidating text-based discussions of other kinds of texts in small and large group settings.⁹

Four ideals of the *havrutah* method of study are delineated by the sages which biblical commentator Michael Fishbane presents as follows:

⁸ Orit Kent, *A Theory of Havrutah Learning*. A project of the Mandel Center for Studies in Jewish Education, Brandeis University. <http://www.brandeis.edu/mandel/projects/beitmidrashresearch/index.html>

⁹ Orit Kent, *ibid.*

- the ideal of “sharpening” one’s partner’s intellect so that, in the course of study, the other is enhanced and developed. . . .
- the ideal of “gentility” toward one’s study partner so that, in the course of study, that person’s discourse is heard in its human form, as the words of an individual, not an abstract argument of logic to be confronted. . . .
- the ideal of “attentive listening” to one’s partner’s discourse so that it is affirmed in its human character; and finally
- there is the ideal of “enhancing” the position of one’s partner, who has gathered with oneself to collective study. . . .

God supports the event of learning and guides it to fruition. Something of the sacredness of speech is espoused here, but also its great fragility and divine character. For God, the source of life, participates in such holy moments¹⁰

By the thoughtful use of this teaching method, teaching can become God’s love in action on the part of students toward each other as well as the teacher toward the students.

Conclusion

To paraphrase the Gospel writer much more could be said but there is neither time nor inclination for more---but it is hoped that what has been said will in some way nourish your life. It is after all almost three-thirty p.m. on a Friday afternoon! Thank you all for your patience! And may your various educational commitments be blessed by this God whose love we all desire to make visible in our teaching!

¹⁰ Michael Fishbane, *Sacred Attunement: A Jewish Theology* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2008) 247.

P.S. I ran across the following this noon as I was preparing for a first death anniversary of a friend of mine and I thought it was very appropriate for this conference. So before I conclude I would like to read it to you:

Heshvan 3¹¹

The Seeding of the Land

Every day in the traditional Jewish liturgy we recall our need for rain in autumn and rain in spring so that the planting cycle can continue. The Hebrew word for “autumn rain” is “*yoreh*,” which comes from the word meaning “to shoot an arrow.” The autumn rains plummet like arrows to their destination in the earth, soaking the soil and giving drink to the seeds. These rains are also teachers, showing us the wisdom of going straight to our destination. While it is the spring rains that fall on the crops as they grow, it is the autumn rains that prepare the seeds for spring. The *yoreh*, the autumn rain of Heshvan, teaches us to nurture seeds at the very beginning so that they will bear fruit as time passes.

“*Yoreh*” can also mean “teacher.” The autumn rains remind us how to be good teachers. When the rain falls too heavily and strongly, it can cause floods. When the rain falls too sparsely, seeds die. Rain must be neither too overwhelming nor too spare to successfully water the land. So it is with teachers: They must give information in a gentle yet persistent way to succeed in transmitting their wisdom.

¹¹ Jill Hammer, *The Jewish Book of Days: A Companion for all Seasons* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 2005), 61.

[Note...the two quote below really belong in the empty space to the left of the quotation...sort of centered...they are the texts that the quotation is commenting on...but I don't know how to put them there....except to cut and paste!!]

*I will give the rain for your
Land, autumn rain and
Spring rain in its season*
--Deuteronomy 11:14

*They sow . . . in Marcheshvan,
And reap in Nisan*
--Rashi on Leviticus 25:21