

# **Maybe the Beatles Were Right: All You Need Is Love**

## **Convocation Address by Dr. Lee Barrett**

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I just realized that I am the oldest person on the faculty. I know that this is true because I get to carry this instrument of terror, the dreaded seminary mace. My exalted status entitles me to exercise one major privilege that comes with seniority: the right to be a curmudgeon, and to say offensive and dispiriting things with impunity. I intend to exercise my prerogative right now.

Allow me to proclaim something depressingly obvious: Christianity is declining in the United States. I don't care what criteria you employ, membership numbers, philanthropic giving, cultural influence, or more intangible indices like spiritual energy and theological profundity, but by all accounts an ecclesia malaise has settled upon us. But, you may object, "Who is the 'us' here? Only the tired old Protestant mainline is declining. But other types of Christians are doing just fine." Wrong, all expressions of Christianity are declining: African-American, Hispanic, evangelical, rural, urban, all are in trouble. The mega-church movement has plateaued and sputtered, and the emerging and missional church movements have not delivered on their promises. Any growth anywhere comes from immigration. The main-line Protestants are just the ones who are leading the pack in the downhill race.

The two urgent questions that sociologists, church leaders, and theologians have wrestled with ever since the decline became undeniable is: Why? And, what can be done to reinvigorate our enervated heritages?

There have been myriad proposed remedies. Maybe the solution is bigger parking lots. Maybe the magic bullet is the embrace of contemporary worship. Maybe electronic projection is the answer. Maybe the intensive utilization of social media will turn things around. Maybe we can tweet and text and blog our way out of the slump. Or maybe we need a new style of leadership, perhaps one borrowed from Harvard Business School. Or maybe Christians just need to procreate faster.

Or maybe the problem is deeper than all this. Maybe it is not the packaging or the marketing of the product; maybe it is the product itself. Maybe there is a problem with the church's message. We are supposed to be proclaiming life-giving, earth-shattering, soul-exploding Good News. But what if our news isn't particularly new, and what if it isn't really all that good?

I sat around and brooded about this during my sabbatical. (Evidently I'm good at brooding.) So I was smoking a cigar and practicing my brooding. It occurred to me that much of the church's energies are aimed at providing the world with goods and services that are otherwise available in the secular realm. We are duplicating services that the secular world can offer more cheaply and more efficiently.

Many churches have reduced their message to nothing more than a specific political agenda. Now I am convinced that passionate political involvement is a necessary component of any form of Christianity, but problems arise when the church is nothing but a political task force. I'm reminded of the bumper sticker that said, "Everything is political, but politics isn't everything." Some evangelical traditions have devolved into the cheering squad for the political right. Some progressive congregations have become the praying wing of the Democratic Party. Churches volunteer to be the chaplaincy corps for the rival factions in the showdown of red states and blue states. The real center of gravity is with the political fervor, and the Christianity part is just an addendum for those who, by accident of upbringing or aesthetic taste, harbor a quaint nostalgia for religious ceremonies. Matthew Arnold wrote that liberal Protestantism was nothing more than "morality tinged with pious emotions." All the praying, the singing of hymns, and the recitation of liturgies become mere window dressing. This attitude, harkening back to Immanuel Kant's assertion that religious convictions are nothing but props for moral action, ends up subordinating Christianity to ideologies of questionable ultimacy and reducing Christianity without remainder to political activism.

If this trend continues, eventually the church will become redundant as people discover that they can derive the same personal benefit from a political rally without the inconvenience of getting up early on Sunday morning. Political ethics can stand on its own two feet now; it no longer needs a sacred ground or a sacred canopy.

In our rapidly becoming secular age, extreme examples of dedication and passionate commitment to social transformation can be found in people who really don't think that their activism needs any religious support at all. Right now I'm imagining the faces of my twenty-something nephew's friends, who were all feeling the burn of Bernie Sanders. Many of them gave up lucrative jobs to campaign for a candidate whose policies ran counter to their own economic interests. Did they feel the need to go to church to fuel their reformist zeal? No. Some of them were third generation agnostics, and quite content to be so.

I brooded some more. It occurred to me that another dead-end is the identification of Christianity with various strategies of self-improvement or self-actualization. Take many worship centers. Often they water the faith down to nothing more than a few words of comfort and a shot of adrenaline for individuals vexed by the anxieties of upward or downward mobility, worried about family dynamics, and obsessed with physical and spiritual health. God is transformed into a cosmic mood-elevator or mood-stabilizer who offers a modicum of tranquility in the struggle to hold family and career together in an increasingly complicated and inhospitable society. The church is reduced to a support group or a pep club spiced with an innocuous smidgen of evangelical language.

The enthusiasm for self-actualization in pop religion is paralleled in the academy's interest in "happiness" or "human flourishing", often associated with the "positive psychology" movement. I was at a conference recently on religion and neuro-science. The neuroscientists typically identified happiness with some sort of pleasurable brain state that can be digitally imaged, monitored, and analyzed. Then they evaluated religious practices according to their ability to activate those neurons. What interested me was that they already had a definition of happiness in mind, so they would know which neurological

connections to examine. As far as I could tell, it was assumed that happiness is the sort of vague feeling of contentment you get after a big Thanksgiving dinner.

It won't take long for people to realize that those states can be triggered by other means, without all the burdensome baggage of religious observances. Take drugs. Use electrodes. Jog until you enter the zone. That is the problem with the over-identification of self-actualization or ordinary happiness with Christianity. If you want to be self-actualized, listen to a motivational CD in the privacy of your own home. If you need community, often a good bar or a bridge club is a better bet than a congregation.

The problem with these versions of our faith is that the distinctiveness of Christianity is jeopardized as it degenerates into a duplication of functions provided, often more potently, by secular channels. If this continues, our faith will simply become redundant. It will go out with a whimper rather than a bang, simply because there isn't anything unique there to capture and hold people's hearts and imaginations.

The health of Christianity will not come through the total identification of our faith with the political and psychological dynamics of our society. Nor will it come through institutional restructurings or committee resolutions.

So what do we do? I've got a radical thought: Let's get back to basics. Let's ask, "What is the purpose of Christianity in the first place?" I would like to consider the late reflections of the classic sociologist Peter Berger. Berger, who was himself a progressive and very politically active Christian, claimed that the main function of any religion is to help people make meaning in the face of a universe that seems chaotic, dangerous, and resistant to human purposes. Religion is what people do to stave off the threat of anomie, meaninglessness. To flourish over time, a religion must provide compelling answers to the questions: Why are we here? Why do we die? And what are we supposed to be doing in between? If a religion fails to provide these answers, people will eventually find it to be superficial, boring, and unnecessary.

So, I want to propose this: If Christianity is to experience a revitalization in the United States, it needs to provide more gripping and enticing answers to those good old meaning of life questions. And I don't mean cognitive propositional answers that you can write on an index card and stick in your wallet, but answers embedded in hymnody, liturgy, and the entire life of the church, and yes, in its preaching and teaching. So then the question becomes: So what is the Christian take on the meaning of life? In the words of G. K. Chesterton, what is the "Christian thing"? In a more American evangelical idiom, what is the Good News?

That is when I thought of the Beatles' "All You Need Is Love." And then I thought of the review in *Rolling Stone* that followed on the heels of its release. The review was the shortest in the history of music; it contained just two words: "It isn't."

Later the critic elaborated that just to invoke "love" can never be enough, because love is a slippery, elusive concept. It suffers from terminal vagueness. Remember this song was dominating the airwaves at a time when the word "love" was bandied about with reckless abandon. This was the era of "love beads," "love-ins," "free love," "the love train," and even "the love boat." Love could mean anything. It

could suggest adolescent hormonal surges, or the sentimentality of a Hallmark card, or the conviviality at an Oktoberfest, or fleeting feelings of compassion for a homeless person, or the warm, fuzzy mood of Christmas Eve, or aesthetic delight in a painting, or even acquisitive desire.

OK, Lennon and McCartney left the concept underdetermined. But what if they were on to something? What if there is a Christian concept of love, and what if that really is all you need? And what if that is the Christian answer to the meaning of life question? So I am going to look at broad swathes of the Christian tradition in the light of Lennon and McCartney's assertion.

So now my question is: What is the Christian concept of love?

Here we quickly run into a problem. There isn't one, univocal concept of "love" in the Christian tradition. There are several, all vying with one another for the status of the true understanding of love. I'm going to pick out two that have been particularly influential in the history of Christianity. I'm going to focus on these two simply because they both intrigue me; and I can do this because I have the big seminary stick.

In the 1920's the Swedish theologian Anders Nygren notoriously suggested that there are two trajectories about love in Christianity: "eros" and "agape." Nygren was accused by later generations of scholars of misconstruing the Greek words. But most theologians now claim that such criticisms miss the point. Nygren wasn't doing a word study; he was mapping out two different tendencies that really can be discerned in the tradition, no matter what you call them. Nygren has been rehabilitated by Gene Outka at Yale, Tim Jackson at Emory, and Daphne Hampson at Oxford. When those stars are in alignment, we should pay attention.

The "eros" take on love, transmuted by the early church in the West into "caritas," is most evident in the Catholic heritage.

Here love is understood as mutual, reciprocal delight in the other. The lover and the beloved appreciate, no, they cherish one another's excellences. In order for this to work, the lover and the beloved must value the same qualities and must possess and manifest the same qualities; they must share the same excellences. They must see things the same way, desire the same things, and will the same things. There must be mutual understanding based on similarity. The medieval motto was "only like can know like," which implied "Love and only love like."

The model here of our love for God, and ideally for one another, is spousal, or at least deep companionability. It assumes that the bond between spouses is shared interests, habits, and attitudes. Imagine two spouses. One of them loves golf and the other loves meandering walks in the park. Every time they get near a golf course, the one will want to play 18 holes, while the other longs to amble about and examine the flora and fauna in the rough. They will have conflicting goals, conflicting inclinations, and will probably quarrel. Moreover, they won't comprehend each other. One will quote Mark Twain and ask "Why do you want to ruin a perfectly delightful stroll through the park by chasing that stupid little ball with a stick?" The other will protest, "How can you stand to just walk about without any challenges, without any objectives, without any competition?" But, if they both love golf, well, then

they will feel the same thrill and have the same goals. Then they will know what makes each one of them tick. Then there will be empathic bonding.

If that is the way our relationship with God should be, certain consequences follow. If God is this loving mutuality, which is what the Trinity is all about in this tradition (the Father loves the Son and the Son loves the Father and the Holy Spirit is the love that flows back and forth), then we can only be in a fully loving relation with God when we become loving in the way that God is loving. We have to become a glorious exemplar of love in order to be empathically bonded with God. If so, then salvation, beatitude, blessedness, can only happen at the end of an arduous process of transformation in which we mature into splendid exemplars of love. God must be able to delight in our virtue. Put in theological language, we must be sanctified (become holy) in order to be justified (accepted). Consequently, Catholics have typically construed life as a journey, as a pilgrimage toward that state of saintliness. And they have talked about spiritual disciplines (notice the word “discipline”), exercises to strengthen our souls and propel us forward on love’s highway.

Now let’s shift gears. Let’s focus on Protestant love, or more particularly on Lutheran love, for that was bequeathed to all Protestants, at least as something to wrestle with. Lutheran love is very different from Catholic “*caritas*”. (Here I am not talking about Luther himself, but subsequent Lutheranism. Luther was all over the map, notoriously elusive. Hans Frei once quipped that he did not believe that Luther had ever existed, for no one could have been that inconsistent. Luther, he proposed had been invented by Lutheran theologians to give them something to do for centuries.) Lutheran love does not require mutuality. It does not involve imaging the love that God showers upon us. We will never, at least not in this life, take that kind of delight in God and neighbor that the Catholics yearn for.

In classical Lutheranism, we don’t have to grow into that kind of love. Lutherans switch the root metaphor for the Christian life from a spousal image to a parent-child image. And they shift the focus from our growth in love to faith (trust, *fiducia*) in God’s love for us. The Good News is not: “Rejoice, we can grow in love for God,” but “Relax, God loves you just as you are.”

God’s love for us is not a divine craving for reciprocity or a desire to take delight in the virtues of God’s creatures. Rather God loves us just as we are, warts and all. God’s love is unconditional, and often unilateral. God loves us even if we don’t love God back. Just as a parent loves a wayward, even sociopathic child, and that love is not conditional upon the likelihood of the child’s future improvement. Here God’s love is not delight in the beloved, but gratuitous, unmerited care for the beloved.

All we humans need to do is trust in God’s parental care. We will never understand the parent; God remains in God’s depths the hidden God, the “*deus absconditus*”. Think back to when you were a kid. When I was four or five I did not have a clue about where my father went during the day. I could not have begun to comprehend the job he did, the tensions and challenges of the work place, or the complex dynamics of the adult world. All I knew was that he came home with money, food, and toys, and showered me with affection and protection. So also with God. We will never comprehend the

Creator of heaven and earth. All we have to do is trust that the divine parent loves us, cares for us, and will never let us go.

So much for God's love in Lutheranism. What about human love, particularly for our neighbors? Well, God's kind of love will never become part of our personality structure. But on rare occasions we just might reflect it, for just a moment. And that love is unconditional, unilateral, and non-reciprocal. The strength of our love will not be diminished even if the neighbor does not love us back. It's also not contingent on any attractive qualities our neighbor might have. We love them not because they are smart, or athletic, or musical, or successful, or rich, or pretty, but simply because they are there. Because this love is not based on the perception of excellence, it is also non-preferential. We love all our neighbors equally, the refugee from Aleppo just as much as our cousin from Lititz.

There is another consequence. This love is discontinuous with all ordinary earthly loves. There is no expectation that the lover will get anything out of it, as there is in all ordinary forms of love. It is purely self-giving, and, when necessary self-sacrificial. Self-sacrifice has gotten a lot of bad press recently, going back to Valerie Saiving. The argument is that for people who have been dominated, self-sacrifice sounds like an invitation to passively submit to the whims of the oppressor. But this kind of self-sacrifice is no blank check; it is not a directive to become a passive doormat. No, it is not an activity of love to allow an abuser to keep on abusing. If we love our neighbors truly, we will want them to grow in love, and if they are allowed to remain in their stagnant position of domination, they will not grow. Self-sacrifice does not mean, "become a victim."

For five centuries the proponents of each of these two forms of love have merrily consigned one another to hell, in the name of love, of course. Their critiques of one another should be taken seriously, though, for each view does harbor some inherent problems.

Take Catholic love. If we cannot be fully embraced by God until we can love in the way that God loves, that means that in regard to salvation, it ain't over until it's over. The journey of spiritual maturation is always haunted by the possibility that the pilgrim won't have the stamina to complete the journey, won't make it to the finish line of the love Olympics. Therefore, anxiety about one's spiritual progress seems to be intrinsic to the whole schema.

If you do convince yourself that you are making adequate spiritual progress, then an opposite vice kicks in. If you take your love temperature, and conclude that it is rising appropriately, you could fall victim to self-righteousness. You could conclude, "Me and God, we got a lot in common. I'm a pretty darn good partner for God." We could even flaunt our social activism and boast "I sure am glad that I'm not a loveless narcissist like that laissez-faire capitalist over there who drinks from a styrofoam cup and drives a gas-guzzling SUV." You might even calculate how far ahead of everyone else you are and brag, "My crown in glory is going to be bigger than your crown."

And Lutheran love is not without its liabilities. An obvious one is that the focus on trust in God's unconditional love might just lead to abject spiritual complacency. I had a professor who said that he

preferred Luther because Luther was the only theologian who would allow you to skip church on a Sunday morning, kick back in a recliner, grab a six-pack, watch Razorback football, and say to yourself “God loves me.” Some Lutherans have drawn the conclusion that the answer to Paul’s rhetorical question “Should we sin that grace may abound?” is an enthusiastic “Yes!” Andreas Osiander, a follower of Luther, even taught that performing acts of love is injurious to your spiritual health.

So, they both have problems, and both have attractions. Do we have to pick either door A or door B?

No. Some traditions have tried to combine them, mainly the Calvinists and Wesleyans. But the relationship between the two loves remains obscure. Why would feeling accepted by God lead to love of God and neighbor? The Calvinist answer has usually been gratitude. But that is suspiciously self-serving. If I’m grateful that God has justified ME, then that is still all about me; it isn’t about the neighbor, and therefore it isn’t really love. It’s just a *more refined form of spiritual narcissism*.

But there may be a viable third way. Imagine someone really internalizing the theme that God loves them. Loves them no matter what. Unconditionally. Extravagantly. Loves them in all their ugly and messy brokenness. Walks with them in their suffering. Tastes the salt of their tears. Even embraces their guilt. And imagine that they get that. Then they realize that this sort of love must hurt God, it must break God’s heart. Just like a parent maintaining relation with a wayward child, the parent is going to get hurt every time the child messes up. The cross shows that God is willing to risk getting hurt by maintaining a loving relationship with toxic people like ourselves.

Then something wonderful happens. The person is moved by the sublimity, the sheer beauty of that love. She is fascinated by it, captivated by, entranced by it. And what if the old Eastern Fathers and Mothers were right, what if people become like that which they are fascinated by? Then, if that person is enchanted by the vision of God’s self-giving, that self-giving will begin to rub off on her.

So the individual does become loving in the way that God is loving. And she does not do this in order to accrue merit; she does not do it in order to be “saved.” She isn’t motivated by gratitude for getting off the hook.

I did not just make this option up. There is a tradition about Christian love running from Augustine to Kierkegaard that suggests just this. It includes the Franciscans, many of the Rhineland and Flemish mystics, Jonathan Edwards, a whole bunch of Pietists, and even John Wesley in certain moods. There might be something in the human heart, maybe covered over by layers of self-interest and fear, but still there, still beating, that thrills at the prospect of self-giving love. Maybe we are hard wired to have an eros for agape, to find fulfillment through self-abandonment. Think of that part of us that delights in movies with self-sacrificial endings, even *Saving Private Ryan* and *Titanic*. In this schema, you end up at a Catholic destination through a Lutheran route.

If that is right, then Christianity might just have an answer to the question “Why are we here?” And it is an answer you cannot find in any other sector of society. It’s all about the beauty and joy of extravagant, profligate self-giving. If the church could communicate that, maybe the world would stand up and take notice.

So maybe the Beatles were right. All you need is love.