

LOVING PEOPLE SUCKS

*It must be getting tiresome. Those of you who read these bi-weekly reflections might be getting tired of me writing about loving one another as God loves us – yet, here I go again. I may seem to be stuck on one track, but I believe this is the core message Jesus taught, lived and died to proclaim. Instead of some form of didactic exhortation, I am reimagining Jesus' parable of the Prodigal Son. There will be no images included with this reflection because I want you to use your imagination as you read this story. Please remember that what I have written is fictional although I have mixed in some "local flavour." After you're done, take note how hard living a life of self-giving love can be **and** how differently loving actions can be interpreted.*

“Now all the tax collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to Jesus. The Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, ‘This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them.’ So Jesus told a parable.”
- Luke 15:1-3, 11-32

Burt was happy with his life. He had lived in Kincardine his whole life, married his high school sweetheart, Florence, built a nice house to live in, and taken his place in his dad's hardware business. Over the years, the hardware store had grown, finally moving out to highway 21. Despite the expansion he still wanted to be able to call his customers by name, maintaining that friendly small-town feel.

Burt was happy with his community. He had joined the Lion's Club, and went faithfully to the meetings, raising money bit by bit, so that the whole community would benefit. The most recent project for a skate park beside the Davidson Centre was doing very well as he chaired the fundraising committee. He went to church on Sundays, and although the congregation was shrinking, it wasn't doing as badly as some other churches he knew about.

Burt had two daughters. The older daughter, Leanne, was a quiet, avid reader. When she was little, Burt would tease her about her books, but he loved reading to her before bed, cherishing his time snuggled close to her. Sometimes he was so weary from a long day of work that he would try to speed through the book, but she would never let him get away with it. Once in school, she proved to be an average student, but she worked very hard, receiving stellar marks.

When she finished high school, after some careful conversations with Burt, she made the decision to join him at the hardware store. She started as a lowly cashier, but quickly rose to become his assistant manager. Burt liked to point out that she knew where everything was in the store – better than even he did himself. Focused on her work at the store, she continued to live at home, spending most evenings with her parents.

Burt's younger daughter, on the other hand, was very different. Rachel never read books because she was too active with sports and with her social circle. They

would tease her that she was an adrenaline addict. She would just grin wryly while seeking the next new thing to do. When she was little, Burt taught her how to play baseball even though she was barely big enough to hold the bat. He taught her soccer, then hockey, and, too soon, she was too big for him to teach her anything. She joined every team that would take her, eager for each competition, each new adventure.

Then, in High School, things took a turn. Burt started getting calls from the school wondering where Rachel was. Increasingly, coaches would call wondering why she had missed practices or even games. Burt had no idea where she was. The few times she was home, he would talk with her. She would mention friends he never met. When he suggested she invite them for dinner so he could meet them, she just rolled her eyes.

By the time she was in grade eleven, Burt realized he had not sat down to eat dinner with his younger daughter for two weeks. He decided to wait up to talk to her no matter how late the hour. When she came in the back door, her eyes were bleary and bloodshot. She was definitely not in the mood for a heart-to-heart talk with her dad. Burt worried that she was into drugs, but he didn't know how he was supposed to find out nor what the signs might be. Even if she was using, he was at a loss what to do.

One night she didn't come home at all. He phoned around, trying to text the few friends he knew, but no one had seen her. She didn't come home all that day – or the next night either. Then he noticed the cash in his wallet was gone, his credit card was missing and the spare car keys had disappeared. He and Florence checked her bedroom, but everything looked like it was where it belonged.

Burt's older daughter, Leanne, came and stood in the doorway. "She's gone," she stated flatly.

"How do you know?" wondered Florence.

"Her bed is made. The only time she ever made her bed was when she went away to sports camp," answered Leanne.

They phoned the police.

An officer made the missing person report, trying to reassure them they would do everything they could to find Rachel. Any hint of good news from the police never came. After a full week, they admitted that Rachel wasn't hiding out at one of her friend's places – the friends she never wanted to introduce to the family.

Not long after, the first credit card charges showed up on Burt's online statement. Charges were listed for meals from Toronto restaurants, for movie theatres, for tourist attractions and for concert venues. Burt's first reaction was one of relief. At least she was alive. Relief soon flamed into anger only to just as quickly replaced with fear. His

stomach lurched when he thought of human trafficking. Still, he rationalized, they ought to be able to track her through the credit card transactions.

The next day while checking the online credit card statement, there was a chain of gas and food purchases tracing travel all the way to Winnipeg. Burt and Florence's panic blossomed. She was getting too far away. The next day no more charges appeared. It was as if she had never been. This was the worst possible scenario they could imagine.

Gloom filled the house. Leanne kept going to the hardware store every day with Burt. They kept up their usual routine – church, Lions Club, social activities – but their lives felt empty. Both Burt's and Florence's hair turned gray almost overnight. The bags under their eyes became permanent. Leanne grew quieter, more wary, afraid to upset her parents while trying to do her usual stellar job at the hardware store. Weeks turned into months and then into a year without a word from Rachel. They stopped talking about Rachel, although not one family member stopped thinking about her.

Two years passed. They almost had their lives back to "normal." Another six months passed.

The doorbell rang one chilly Sunday afternoon in March. The sky was gray and threatening either rain or snow according to the forecast. Leanne was upstairs, Florence was in the kitchen, and Burt was puttering around in the basement. "I'll get it," he shouted to the house at large.

When he opened the door, there was a frail, thin young mother holding a baby dressed in a pink snowsuit. The mother was not dressed for the weather. She had no gloves nor a toque. Burt looked down and noticed she was wearing worn out running shoes that couldn't keep the mud at bay. Long, stringy hair whipped around her face, randomly fluttered by the wind.

"Yes, can I help you?" asked Burt.

The young mother stood there in silence with her eyes downcast. It was only then that Burt realized who was standing in front of him.

"Well, I'll be..." was all he managed to say before he lurched forward, wrapping his arms around his daughter and the baby, hugging them close to his heart while tears cascaded.

"Dad," Rachel choked out, "Dad, I'm so sorry..." but she didn't get any farther. Burt hustled her into the kitchen where Florence was taking the dishes out of the dishwasher.

"Florence, look who's here!" he crowed as a smile split his face. "Oh Rachel, we thought you were dead. Look, you're alive. Oh Rachel, you've come home."

“Mom,” Rachel began, “I’m so sorry....” She got no further than that. Her Mother gasped, wrapping her arms around her – at least until the baby began to complain about being squeezed so hard.

Burt went to the phone. “Charlie,” he yelled into the receiver to his brother on the other end, you’ll never guess who’s home!” Then he phoned his sisters, then all the workers from the store, then their friends from church, then his fellow Lion’s Club members, and finally his best friends down the street.

Florence put on a big pot of coffee while pulling some muffins out of the freezer to reheat. In her mind she was already figuring out how to make a filling casserole from the leftover chicken in the ‘fridge.

It wasn’t necessary. As people began arriving in response to Burt’s phone calls, there was banana cake, a couple large pizzas, a couple boxes of Tim’s and a few hot rotisserie chickens from Sobey’s. It was an impromptu feast bubbling with joy.

“You look frozen,” said Florence to Rachel while sitting at the kitchen table with a stunned look on her face. “I’ll run you a nice, hot bath. I’ll scrounge up some of your old clothes. They’re clean, you know. Here, let me hold the baby, may I?”

By then they had learned the baby’s name was Ruthie, Ruthie Florence, and there were already three women crowding into the kitchen vying to be the next to get to hold her. Florence took Rachel upstairs for that promised hot bath.

Once upstairs, Leanne was leaning against the door of her bedroom. As Rachel emerged from the bathroom wrapped in a towel, she looked her sister up and down, and sneered, “Well, look what the cat dragged in.”

Rachel hesitated. She and her sister were exactly the same height so their eyes met at the same level. “Leanne, I’m sorry,” began Rachel.

“Well, you should be,” said Leanne interrupted, deliberately turning her back on her lost sister as she shut her bedroom door quietly but firmly, decisively and dismissively.

Preoccupied with putting out a choice of clean, warm clothing, Florence hardly noticed the sisters’ tense exchange. While Rachel was getting dressed, the house continued to fill up with people, with friends, with neighbours and with family, all thrilled to be able to welcome Rachel home – all, that is, except Leanne.

When Burt realized Leanne was missing, he knocked on her bedroom door. “Leanne,” he began, “You know I love you. You know I would do anything for you, but I love Rachel, too. These last two years have been horrible for all of us. This is a beginning, but we are all going to have to figure out where to go from here. For today,

let's just celebrate. We thought she was dead, but she's alive and here with us again! Come on out, won't you? Please?"

We read the parable in the Bible and nod our heads, assured that all it takes is love. It's like the Beatles proclaiming when they sang, "All you need is love!" However, love is not just the warm, fuzzy feeling in our hearts when we feel good. Love is the challenging process of honestly dealing with our emotions – all while in relationship with one another. Consider the tsunami of emotions this family is going to have to wrestle with over the rest of their lives: Feelings of anger, of shame, of resentment, of gratitude, of guilt, of joy, of hate, of tenderness, of longing, of dread, of excitement, of loneliness, of depression – and so many more – like waves crashing on the beach. Love is more than a journey. Love is our constant becoming more fully who we are created to be. Nevertheless, love is ever our connective tissue as we work at each relationship. In the end, never forget that we have an enormous capacity for love, both to give and to receive. Trust that!