

“LOVING LIKE JESUS”

I ran across two items recently, one innocent and sweet, the other not so much. The first is a brief exchange between two characters in A.A. Milne’s Winnie the Pooh.

Piglet: “How do you spell love?”

Pooh: “You don’t spell it, you feel it.”

I came across these lines on the same the day I watched on DVD the last episode of the BBC TV series “Jekyll,” an update of Robert Louis Stevenson’s classic book Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde. As you may recall the doctor is a reputable man, but he transforms into Hyde, an unrestrained, immoral and violent figure. In this contemporary version Jekyll is a man named Tom Jackman. His mother says to his wife, “People think Hyde is rage or hate or greed or lust. But Hyde is far worse.” “What is he?” asks his wife. His mother replies with a question: “What was the first day you knew you could kill anyone, anyone at all, if you had to?” After a moment of hesitation, she answers, “The day I first held my children.” His mother then replies, “It’s our oldest, deadliest impulse: the need to protect our own at the expense of any other living thing. And we give that impulse such a nice name, don’t we? Hyde is love.”

And there you have it: the sentimental and the brutal. Yes, we use that word “love” to describe both the tender affections we feel and those attachments we have that can lead us to kill and destroy whoever and whatever we believe threatens those nearest and dearest to us. In the name of “love” two individuals walk down a church aisle and vow to one another to be faithful in poverty or wealth and sickness or health. But it is also “love” that motivates those on the battlefield to do Hyde-like behaviors to protect people, land and principles that are cherished. From love comes both delight and destruction.

How do you define love? If we believe Jesus is Lord, for us he is the very definition of love. His life displays to us what love looks like. The love Jesus embodied was neither sentimental nor compatible with deadly force. In him we see a love that is self-giving, compassionate, forgiving, truthful, and so wide-flung that it is an affront to those with narrow notions about who counts as worthy of regard. Jesus loved in a way that leaves no room for ideas like “us” versus “them” or “friends” versus “enemies.” Jesus taught, “Love your neighbor as yourself,” but then made it clear that enemies are also neighbors we must love (Matthew 5:43; 22:39).

For us who follow Jesus, love is not a vague value that we define in any way we prefer. Rather love is what we have had poured out on our behalf by Jesus and that we are to pass on to others. Or as Jesus said, “Love one another as I have loved you” (John 13:34, 15:12). To find love undistorted by passion, fear or self-interest, we look to see how Jesus lived and how he treated others. The supreme expression of love is found at the cross of Christ, that place where his faithful life in a wayward world brought him into the hands of the powers-that-be and where he absorbed the violence of others without attempting to inflict violence in return. It is here at the cross that we learn what it means to “follow in his steps” (1 Peter 2:20-21).

As we live in this world, we are to be, as Jesus said, “wise as serpents and harmless as doves” (Matthew 10:16). The world is a hazardous place. We can get hurt as we follow Jesus. We need to be wise as we go about giving and forgiving, healing and helping, welcoming and embracing those who few others are willing to embrace. Christ-centered love is risky. But that is our calling. Our broken and suffering world is desperately in need of the kind of love we have been given to share. God alone knows what wonderful things can happen as we follow Jesus. Let your light shine with the radiance of divine love.