

“Centrifugal Love”

Some of you know that once upon a time I was a science teacher. What you probably don't know is that there was one science field I wasn't very good at. I took a year of high school physics and another year of college physics, but I was not a natural at understanding physics.

However, I want to use a physics demonstration this morning to portray God's love. And thanks to youtube, I think I understand it enough to be able to describe what is happening as I spin this ball on a string. (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9s1IRJbL2Co>, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=weeiZjz-Q-o>)

It's analogous to the moon orbiting the earth. The force we call gravity pulls the moon towards the center. If gravity were suddenly to be eliminated, the moon, propelled by its velocity and mass, would zoom off into space on a tangent. Similarly, there is a force pulling this ball toward the center, which in this case is my hand. This force, the tension in the string, is called centripetal force. If I spin it faster, the centripetal force increases. If I were to use a larger ball, the force would increase. If I make the radius longer, the force decreases. Centripetal force, center-seeking force, pulls toward the Center.

But you will also remember Newton's 3rd Law, “for every action, there is an equal and opposite reaction.” So there is an equal and opposite force pushing outwards. This is known as centrifugal force. Now, to be technical about it, this force is really a function of the inertia of the ball, and we should call it an “apparent” force. If the string were cut, the ball would fly away on a tangent, not straight out, in the opposing direction to the radius. But what is real is how that push outwards can be used. At the end of a washing machine cycle, the water is spun out, and you see the evidence in the laundry, spun to the outside of the tub. Centrifugal force pushes the wet clothes to the edge and the water exits through the holes in the tub.

God's love is the centripetal force tethering us to the center, our source, which is God. God's love creates a centrifugal response which pushes us outward towards others in the world.

I think that's what Jesus was trying to tell his disciples in the first century world in which they all lived. “As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you,” he began. God's love, through Christ, is God's pull on us. Human beings are spiritual beings. We are drawn toward the mystery of the divine. We seek the reality we cannot see or touch but which we sense through our spirits: that great Other, our Higher Power, the ground of our being, the heartbeat at the center of the universe. A few weeks ago, at the Parliament of the World's Religions, Dan and I encountered thousands of others who name God differently and practice their spiritual quest differently than we do as Christ's disciples. All of us know those of other religious or spiritual traditions. And we can recognize in them our common humanity, and our common desire to live a true and meaningful life, connected to something ultimate beyond ourselves. As Christians, we find that truth in our encounter of God in Jesus Christ. I believe Christ is the truth of God's love. So when he says, “As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you,” I feel the tug on my soul which keeps me in orbit, the pull on my heart which keeps me centered, the tether on my life which keeps me from flinging off into space. And when he adds, “Abide in my love,” he asks for a response. With the gift of knowing that I am beloved of God, I respond, “Yes, Lord, I will.”

I hope you feel that same tether of God's love. Sometimes we lose our connection, and we become lost. I hope you know in your hearts what St. Augustine meant when he prayed, "Thou hast made us for thyself, O Lord, and our hearts are restless until they rest in thee."

"As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you. Abide in my love." Jesus then teaches his disciples what it means to abide in his love. Biblical love is much more than a feeling, it's both an action and a state of being. Take up residence in God's love, he tells us, by doing what I command you to do, which is to love one another. Now instead of a single rotating ball, picture the Gravitron, that amusement park ride of centrifugal force in which thrill seekers stand up around the circle and then are buckled in for a spin. Jesus is telling the Gravitron riders to reach out and hold hands, this isn't just about my love for you individually, you must love one another.

Now in other places in the gospels, Jesus tells disciples to love neighbors and strangers, and even to love enemies. But in this conversation, he is telling us to love one another within the community of disciples, for this is what marks the community as his community. Love is the unifier, the quality, and the required behavior of Christ's church. I recently learned that in the Pribilof Islands of Alaska, the indigenous Unangan people greet one another with more than just "hello." They always say, "Hello, my other self." Jesus tells us that he binds us into such a community, that we see ourselves in the other. And thus we become more like him, willing to sacrifice for one another, even to the point of our very lives.

There are many times when I witness such love in the church, when we truly become the community of love Jesus commands, and those times have forged my love for the church. When the church gathers around those who are suffering, or grieving, or in need, we abide in Christ's love. When the church receives strangers with open arms, and demonstrates generosity that is sacrificial, love abides in us. When the church considers children and elderly people and those with disabilities first, not as an afterthought-then we are doing what Jesus commands. And then there are those other times-such as when the church gets caught up in being right or being superior or being popular, so much so that being loving is neglected. I think Jesus is warning us to keep love at the center, and love as our goal.

Centripetal, and centrifugal. Love going in, and love going out. Writer W. Paul Jones speaks of Christian love as a lifelong process, the movement from "useful" love, that is, love which fulfills one's personal need, to "intrinsic" love, that is, love for its own sake. ("Love as Intrinsic Living," *Weavings*, Jan/Feb 1998, p. 30) Intrinsic love means loving all things for the sake of God.

And so the circle of love expands as we mature in Christ, from loving self to loving those in our families, to loving one another in our community of faith, to loving neighbors and strangers and enemies, to loving all because God loves all and God is in all. But here's the thing-we can't take credit for the love we learn to share with the world, for it all comes from God to us. We simply grow in awareness and receptivity, and then God does the work in us. What then emerges from our lives in Christ is God's fruit, love's fruit.

Jones describes it this way: "When one's center is filled by a God without boundaries, Christian love becomes expansive, permitting no perimeters, a love that is centrifugal." (Jones, *op. cit.*, p. 33)

My friends, the love that calls us is a powerful centripetal force, calling us to our center, who is God. And the love to which we are called is an equally powerful centrifugal force, sending us out to love the world. There are no boundaries to who God loves. There are no limits on who we can love.

Which is why we should be alert to any voices which tell us otherwise. Yes, love will push us beyond our comfort zones. And love is not an easy command to obey. But love is Christ's way, the way we say we want to follow.

Yesterday I received two emails which challenged the limits of my love. Kori Robbins, our Presby Cat graduate who is serving a year as a Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) Young Adult Volunteer in New York City, wrote a blogpost about visiting an immigration detention center in New Jersey. For Kori, that day put human faces on immigration enforcement, as she has now talked with people picked up after many years of living in the U.S., and she has seen what is happening to them. The second email was from the Presbyterian Outlook, a national publication based in Richmond, VA. Staff writer Leslie Scanlon traveled to the Texas-Mexico border and wrote stories about what happens to migrants when they cross the border, when they apply for asylum, and when they appear in court. She also reported on humanitarian relief efforts, interviewing those who are working night and day to help.

Around the world people are migrating, for many different reasons but not just for the fun of it. While we all are aware of the several thousand Central Americans who have traveled through Mexico in recent weeks, how aware are we of the 3.5 million who have been given refuge in Turkey, or the 1.4 million in Uganda? And if the people of Lebanon, population 4 million, can host more than 1 million refugees from the civil war in Syria, what does it say about our country that we are so afraid of the problems of our neighbors? Is our love limited? Or can we do something to help make more people feel safe in their homes and communities so they won't need to leave? And in the meantime, are we Christian enough to provide refuge?

We can, and must, start with sharing God's love close to home, getting proximate to those who are poor, those who are lost, and those who are lonely. It will change our lives to do so. And it will change the world. But after all, what are we here for? To maintain the status quo? Or to be part of God's love force, transforming the world?

I come back to Paul Jones: "When one's center is filled by a God without boundaries, Christian love becomes expansive, permitting no perimeters, a love that is centrifugal."

This is my commandment, says Jesus, that you love one another as I have loved you. May love be our source, our ethic, and our light, in everything we think say, and do.