

“Love Letter”

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First Presbyterian Church
Sunday, August 25, 2013

Old Testament Lesson – Deuteronomy 30:9-14
New Testament Lesson – Colossians 1:1-14

XXX, OOO; you know, kisses and hugs. If Paul was writing today, you might see that kind of farewell or salutation at the end of his letter to the Colossians. XXX, OOO. You remember, how grandmothers used to sign cards with a few X's and O's, and I'm sure they still do. But what's different these days is the use of XO in *e-mails*, and not just emails sent by grandmothers.

The Atlantic magazine (December 2012) tells about a New York City comedy writer named Amanda McCall who had a run in with an email signed XO.¹ It was the day after her phone call with a Los Angeles producer, and Amanda received an e-mail from the producer, saying she “absolutely *loved*” their phone call. And she ended the email with a long string of O's and X's; hugs and kisses.

Well now, this had been a professional business call. So imagine how surprised Amanda was when another e-mail arrived from the producer with the subject line XO. The message? It simply said XOXOXOXOXOXOXO, period, end of message.

That's a lotta love. Amanda was a little concerned. She wondered if she should e-mail back, asking the producer what she meant. She wondered if the producer was actually in love with her. Amanda wrestled with how to respond. Wouldn't she hurt the producer's feelings if she didn't respond with an equal number of X's and O's? To which I say, uh-uh. Stop the emails; end it right there.

But then again, I'm a 21st Century male, and men these days just don't toss the “love word” around that much, particularly with groups of people like the ones in our NT lesson today; the ones Paul and Timothy are addressing in their letter. These are groups of men, women, boys and girls, and none of them blood relatives, or even in-laws by marriage. We just don't use the “L” word so freely in this day and age. But why not? What's different? What has changed?

Well, the biggest change is 2,000 years. We've had more than 2,000 years since Jesus Christ walked the earth inspiring jaded old, one-time Pharisees like Paul – and others – to tap into their heart of hearts, allowing their softer, more nurturing side to rule the day.

Having experienced the love of Christ, Paul is not afraid of the words “love” and “beloved.” He uses such words over 130 times. He speaks of God's love, the love of Christ, the love of the Spirit, beloved fellow servants, God's beloved Son, and the need both to love one another and to be united in love.

¹ <http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2012/12/the-xo-factor/309174/>

So Paul is an XO, hugs-'n'-kisses kind of guy; certainly more so than most of us, both us males and you females out there. No, our X's and O's don't *generally* rise to the level of love that Paul expresses in his letter to the Colossians.

For us, most of our expressions of love are more cryptic than Paul's; less direct. We give someone a small gesture of our love – maybe a present. Or we might gently take the other's hand or offer a gentle kiss.

Or we may bump shoulders with a good friend and exchange a goofy smile, saying, "Love ya bro!" before pushing each other away and getting back to the ballgame. As genuine and important as these little expressions of love are, they pale in comparison to Paul's love letter.

So in a world of X's and O's, shoulder bumps, little presents, and gentle hugs 'n' kisses, what *does* it mean for us to have love "for all the saints?" Love for all the saints is what Paul thanks God for, when the news reaches him about how the Colossians treat one another. "...

What would we have to be doing here in order for those who look in on us to go away marveling at our love for one another? You know, the way Paul's friend Epaphras marveled at what he called the Colossians' "love in the Spirit."

Epaphras was so taken with their transformation after they become followers of Christ that he just couldn't help but talk it up, spreading the news of their display of Christian love. How do we get such notoriety?

We begin," says the Rev. Henry Brinton of Fairfax, Virginia, "with a redefinition. The use of (an) X as (the) symbol for affection goes back at least to the year 1763, when *The Oxford English Dictionary* first defined X as – quote-unquote – 'kiss.'

"But let's go back even farther, to the Greek alphabet that was used in the New Testament. There we find the letter *chi*, which looks like an X." Chi is the first letter of the Greek word *Christos*," or Christ.

So, for the faithful, "X does not mean 'kiss,' it means 'Christ.' X points us to the love that is at the heart of the Christian life." X is **the real love letter**. We see this in how love is connected for us through Christ, in the letter to the Colossians Paul and Timothy say, "we always thank God ... for we have heard of your faith in Christ Jesus and of the love that you have for all the saints."

The Colossians got this kind of notoriety by showing – or displaying – their faith in Jesus through how they treated each other, and in how they treated those they met and welcomed into the faith. They became a reflection of Jesus, whose ultimate expression of love was offering himself as a perfect sacrifice, to bring us forgiveness and new life, spiritual growth and vitality.

(The Colossians) had been given a clear picture of love in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus, *and* (having come to see and believe), they "are now trusting (Jesus) to lead them as they attempt to love one another."

“X does not point to **a romantic kind of love**,” notes Brinton. X “is a mark of *sacrificial* love – one that feeds the hungry, clothes the naked, heals the sick, welcomes strangers, and even lays down one’s life for a friend. X is the type of love that we at this church show when we collect school supplies for needy children; support our young people and others in missions to Guatemala, Kenya, and Jamaica; and reach out in countless other ways, both material and spiritual, to uplift and assist those in need. X is the kind of love the Colossians discovered and embodies when they put their faith in Jesus Christ. It’s the kind of love they couldn’t – and wouldn’t – do without.

But, is such a Christ-like love the kind of love that we crave over anything else in our society? Or do we settle for – and even come to expect from one another – a more shallow and trite kind of love?

For instance, news anchor Diane Sawyer is known to throw around a lot of love. She so frequently signs her messages with an XO that as ridiculous as it sounds, a real panic can break out in the newsroom when she doesn’t. “Oh, no!” her colleagues worry. “Diane did not “XO” me!”²

Kind of silly – and kind of sad. It’s sad for us to settle for and come to expect that kind of superficial love, when the love of Christ is available for any who would have it, any who would accept and seek to express the sacrificial, Christ-like love God gives.

We don’t have to give up our little expressions of “XO love,” as long as we first spend some time focusing on and thinking about how well any and all of our expressions actually reflect a single-X Christian love.

One X; that’s enough. As it was for the Colossians, who themselves were not perfect – so it is with us: our imperfect and limited expressions of Christian love are enough. God can work with them; God can work with us. When we turn to one another in Christian love, mindful of what love means in the context of Jesus Christ, and his sacrificial love that’s when god is working miracles, in us; through us.

Even as imperfect as we are, God in Christ lifts up each and every one of our expressions of love, and raises them up, and makes them holy, not through our efforts, but through the power of God’s love.

God sent us the ultimate expression of love. God wrote about it in a letter we call the Bible, and God signed that letter with an X, or in Greek, with the letter *chi*, a *Chi* that we know as *Christos*, *Iesous Christos*, Jesus Christ.

Christian Love. Far from being a set of O’s and X’s, hugs and kisses, “God’s love creates an entirely new reality for those who become disciples” of Jesus Christ. God’s love “changes human hearts and minds, and pulls us closer to the kingdom that Jesus has come to establish in this world.”²

That’s the power of X – the world-changing power of the love of God.

² <http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2012/12/the-xo-factor/309174/>

“So when you finish an e-mail or a letter or a note, consider signing off with a single X instead of a trendy XO. People might assume you are sending them a kiss, but in reality (you will be) sending them Christ.”

The letter X; now we know what it really means, It means you want to love your neighbor as yourself, knowing that our world works best when we are in it together. X means that we are moving a little closer to the kingdom of God’s beloved Son, and X means that you want your friends and loved ones” to come along for the journey.²

“XO is a nice message of hugs and kisses. But a single X, when it points to Christ, carries the true message and meaning of love. So let’s all be sure to sign each of our actions and all of our words with a single X, a single X that tells everyone we meet that Christ is the source of our love. Amen.

Pastoral Prayer

Loving God, we who bear Christ’s name make up a unique kind of family. We are not bound together by relationships charted on family trees. We cannot be identified by family features of personality or physical appearance.

We of this church have not ever lived with one another in the closeness that is a family’s fondest hope.

We are family nonetheless, and for that we offer our grateful praise.

We give thanks for the faith that binds us together, for the spiritual heritage that has its roots in the person and work of Jesus Christ. We give thanks for the sharing of a commitment to do your will, for the striving to act in love that serves as our identifying feature.

We give thanks for having in common a home in your creation and your eternal realm, and for having a sense that all humanity is one family in your eyes.

In companionship with our brothers and sisters, we pray, as Jesus taught us, saying together: saying:

Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name.

Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.

Give us this day our daily bread; and forgive us our debts,
as we forgive our debtors;

and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.

For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever. Amen.