

“True Ecclesial Love”

Michael Ignatieff is in town. I might need to tell you that because the front pages of the newspapers devote all their space to the Canucks and the H1N1 flu virus. Although Michael is two years older than me, we share some similarities. We both came from a Presbyterian heritage. We both lived in the United States for five years (I was born there, he was a professor at Harvard). We both worked for newspapers when we were in university (I for the student newspaper—he for the Globe and Mail). We were both at the University of British Columbia at the same time (I was a student at the Vancouver School of Theology—he was a history professor at UBC). We are both trying to shepherd our groups (me two small congregations—he the Liberal Party of Canada)—actually not much similarity at all. But there is one more thing...

I have been reading his book, “True Patriot Love: Four Generations in Search of Canada”, and was struck that the way he speaks about Canada is similar to the way I feel about the United Church of Canada. So in a blatant act of plagiarism (within the confines of the law) I would like to recite some of this book with a slight change of context—the nation of Canada to the United Church of Canada—the two thousand year old church of Jesus Christ.

Loving the church is an act of the imagination. We start from what we know—the church where we grew up, the music that touched our hearts, words that changed our lives, the feelings when we sit in a familiar place—and we make these parts stand for the whole. What we know is only a fragment of what is there. We have to imagine the expanse we have not seen. We have to imagine the ties that bind us to our fellow disciples, many of whom many not even speak the same language.

We reason out from the rituals we share, the rights we enjoy, the traditions we hold in common—and we imagine belonging to a place we can call home. Our

ecclesial system, the leaders, the laws, the symbols and anthems matter to us because, when they work as they should, they give us the feeling that we share a life in common with the strangers we call fellow disciples.

We engage in this act of imagination because we need to. The lives we live alone do not make sense to us unless we share some dimension with others. We need a life in common, some set of reference points and allegiances to give us a way to relate to the strangers among whom we live. Without this feeling of belonging, even if only imagined, we would live in fear and dread of each other.

When we can call the strangers disciples, we can feel at home with them and with ourselves. Isaiah Berlin described this sense of belonging well. He said that to feel at home is to feel that people understand not only what you say, but also what you mean. You love the church because it gives you the possibility of feeling at home. You cannot feel this alone. Your emotions must be shared with others in order for them to make any sense at all. A solitary disciple is a contradiction in terms. Love of church is an emotion shared in the imagination across time, shared with the dead, the living and the yet to be born.

Love of church, being imagined, is not a natural feeling like hunger. The church, with all its complex emotions, is a necessary human invention. What we imagine we can forget. What we dream we can lose. Churches, being human creations, can experience both birth and death.

A church begins to die when people think life is elsewhere and begin to leave. It begins to die when order disintegrates, when people cease to trust their fellow disciples or their leaders—their shepherds. In a church that is truly alive, the laws hold us in obedience,

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not just through fear of punishment but also through attachment to the values and traditions the laws protect. If this attachment wanes, if obedience is reduced to fear, either chaos or tyranny beckons.

While love of church has to be shared, the feelings that are shared are not necessarily the same for everyone. Love of church is a contested emotion because churches are contested places. Disciples disagree with each other about what the church should stand for, what its tradition means and what path it should take in the future.

These disagreements are intrinsic to the life of any church that calls itself faithful. To be a disciple is to belong but also to argue. People will even argue about love of church itself. Some disciples, often the more thoughtful ones, don't love their church and don't believe you should love it either. They don't believe in the emotion itself. They will tell you that the church is old fashioned and out of style. The world has moved on. Beliefs are porous. Church traditions are no longer self-contained. Traditions are no longer closed to the outside world. Besides love of the old ways only brought intolerance and injustice. We are postmodernist and any group has a claim on the truth. So don't talk to me about your love of church and, whatever you do, don't ram it down my throat.

To love the church in the modern age is to be in perpetual argument with the postmodernists. But we, who love the church, need to listen. For the borders of the church should never be the limits of our current values and truth. Those unwilling to learn from languages, cultures and traditions beyond the boundaries of their own are in prison, even if they may not notice the bars. The claim of one's own church should never be total. A true disciple can always admit the limitations of the church. A true disciple can always see the place for what it is.

To love anyone is to feel responsible for them, to want to watch over and keep them from harm. To love a church is to feel the same, to feel responsible for her affairs, to feel angry when things are going badly, to feel good when things are going well and, above all, to feel that you have some small role in shaping the course of her journey.

If you are a disciple in the modern world, you have some explaining to do. When was the last time you told someone you loved your church? We are more

often embarrassed by our affiliations than proud? It is ironic, yet we love what we love, and maybe that is good enough.

People love the church despite a lot of things, despite the minister, despite the music leader, despite our history with the residential schools. We love it because we haven't given up on it. We love it because of its unrealized possibilities.

We love our church not because we think it is perfect or even satisfactory, but we think it can change for the better. Love of church requires us to be forgiving of the way things are. Shepherds come and go. Sometimes they let us go as if they were only hired hands. The church changes all the time, sometimes for better, sometimes for worse, yet the potential for its redemption endures. The same potential endures in each of us.

A church's past is rarely always glorious, and a true disciple is obliged to be truthful, to acknowledge the dark with the light. The morality of discipleship turns on being both truthful and hopeful at the same time truthful about the dark passages, hopeful that the light passages give hope for our future.

We never love our church just for what it is. We love it for what it might yet become. The same is true for the love we bear ourselves. And our love is always rooted in hope, grounded in our faith and our certain knowledge that the good shepherd will guide us to springs of living water and we will abide in God's house forever.