

Sermon ✝ May 9, 2021
Frank H. Maxwell

In June of 1981, some teenagers were walking in the hills near the village of Medjugorje an obscure little place in central Europe where they lived . . . and they had a very special experience. They reported that the Virgin Mary had appeared to them and had given them messages from her son, Jesus. The first encounter came to two young girls. When the first one saw what she thought was the Virgin Mary, she said, “*Look, it's Our Lady.*” The other girl said something like, “*Oh, come on now, why would Our Lady appear to us?*”

But the next day, they returned with a few of their friends, and the Virgin appeared to them again and spoke to them and promised to keep meeting them and giving them messages from Jesus. In fact, the young people reported that Mary continued to appear to them and to give them messages to convey to others. The content of the messages has been varied. Much of it has to do with the practices of Christian piety that are parts of the Roman Catholic tradition. But, the summary of the messages could be contained in two appeals. The first is, “*Return to your faith.*” The second appeal is, “*Love one another.*” According to the teenagers, Mary said Jesus wants the people to learn to live together in love. The appearances continued to occur for several years.

The news of the appearances soon spread throughout the world. People began to come from distant parts of the earth to be in the presence of something miraculous. In fact, many miraculous healings were reported. Today, Medjugorje is major pilgrimage site and it is reported that the Virgin Mary continues to appear to young people. They've got a website and the whole deal.

I have to admit I never know what to make of such stories, although the older I get . . . the less skeptical I am. And as strange as the whole thing might seem to me, one thing rings true: the message. If Jesus actually were going to send a message to this world we live in, I think it might very well be just what the young people reported, “*Return to your faith*” and “*Learn to live together in love.*”

But why did the Virgin Mary appear to a couple of kids who were out for a walk? What was the urgency of the occasion?

The little town of Medjugorje is located in Bosnia. And when this appearance was first reported to have occurred, it was a country in which there were deep hatreds that had existed between religious and ethnic groups for centuries.

There was a great danger that the old hatreds could assert themselves and tear the country into parts and set the parts against each other in terrible destructive conflict. There was an urgency for the people to recover their religious faith and to learn to live together in love.

Unfortunately, the ethnic and religious factions in Bosnia did not heed this warning and the country was torn apart by bloodshed and war. Evidently, too many people paid more attention to the miracle than to the message. They didn't learn to love in time to avoid a tragedy. The old hatreds were able to take control and to divide the nation and set the people against each other.

What is the point in telling this story? Simply this: there is an urgency of our need to learn to love. We have all heard that Jesus commanded us to love one another. But, too often we have not taken that very seriously.

We have either watered it down into something sweetly sentimental, or we have thought of it as an impossible idea. *When the requirements of love conflict with our other inclinations, we usually set aside the requirements of love.*

Jesus had something very real and practical in mind when he commanded us to love. He commanded us to love because we need very badly to love. Our failure to love puts us in so many kinds of danger that we can't imagine them all.

The commandment to love is urgent. We must not forget that. We no longer live in a world divided between a couple of great super powers. We live in a world in which there are many little conflicts that could flare up and do destructive things to the people of the world at any given moment.

Most noticeably, are the long-standing hatreds that exist between peoples of different ethnic and religious groups. And isn't it tragic that religious groups should be identified as the sources of hatreds? Jesus came to tell us that God wants us to love one another. Our world has an urgent need to learn that and to follow it.

As terrible as hate is, it is still not the direct opposite of love—indifference is. Hate at least attributes some identity to the ones who are hated. Indifference treats them as if they are not important—or as if they don't exist. That is worse. There is an urgency to love

There are communities and schools and churches that are stagnating and becoming dysfunctional because no one cares enough to do what is needed to keep them doing what their people need for them to do.

There are families falling apart because their members have never learned how to love. And there are people—lots of people—for whom life is less than real because they have never learned to love life and to love others and to love themselves with a really healthy self-love.

We talk a lot about love, but what we say about it suggests some very inadequate ideas about what it is. Jesus has shown us what love is. He said, *“This is my commandment, that you shall love each other as I have loved you.”*

What kind of love has Jesus demonstrated? He has shown us a love that is commitment. It is a love that wants life, real life, fullness of life, life at its best for those who are loved. And it is a love that is willing to do whatever is necessary for those who are loved to have that life no matter what it costs. This is what the cross was all about.

If we love someone, especially someone who is lonely or angry or full of hate, that person may eventually be changed by love, changed into someone who can love. In that way love can fill the earth and change it.

That is the strategy of Jesus for changing the world. It will work if we work it. It is the hope of the world, the only real hope.

So . . . know yourself as one who is loved by God and by others. Take that love into yourself and let it change your life.

Then share it with others and become a participant in the life-shaping multiplication of love. It will not always be easy. It may generate painful conflicts within ourselves. But God will make you able. And the prize is worth the price.

Love is not only the hope of the world, it is also your own only hope for fullness of life. We all have an urgent need to learn to love.



Motherly love . . .