

The Law of Love

I discovered a new book last week that blew my mind. My husband often gets books as gifts from friends and colleagues - books on topics like philosophy, history, and current events. Last week, on the coffee table in the living room were two new ones. The one that blew my mind was called "The 48 Laws of Power" by Robert Greene. It was published in 1998 and was a best seller. It is billed as a practical guide for anyone who wants power or to protect themselves against power.

I looked at the table of contents - which helpfully had not only a title for each chapter, but a summary as well. Here's a sample:

- Law 1: Never outshine the Master, make them feel superior
- Law 2: Never put too much trust in friends; learn how to use enemies
- Law 3: Conceal your intentions, keep people off-balance
- Law 8: Make other people come to you, use bait if necessary
- Law 10: Avoid the unhappy and unlucky - helping someone in misery will only drag you down.

You can see where this is going. And there are 48 of these laws! I was glad to see the summaries, it saved me the trouble of actually reading the book.

Now, I bet a lot of us would look at these laws and recognize that many or most of them are used in business and politics all the time. After all, the author says they are derived from historical figures like Machiavelli and P.T. Barnum. (One review in the London Sunday Times said the book had become the "Hollywood backstabber's bible.")

But as I read through the list I got an uncomfortable feeling that I'd experienced some of them in surprising settings - like church.

- Law 5: So much depends on reputation, learn to poke holes in the reputations of your enemies
- Law 15: Crush your enemy - (he claims that even Moses used this tactic) - crush the body and spirit of your opposition
- Law 20: Do not commit to anyone but yourself, play people against each other
- Law 26: Keep you hands clean; use scapegoats to keep your appearance spotless
- Law 42: Strike the shepherd and the sheep will scatter, neutralize other strong individuals

You may well ask, "Mary, in what church did you see these abominable actions?!" Or some of you might be nodding in recognition because you actually have seen it in action.

These 48 laws encourage

- finding and exploiting the weaknesses of others
- gaining advantage over others
- keeping people off-balance to control them

- They use the language of war - people are either allies or enemies, but trust neither
- Law 22 actually says you should turn the other cheek to infuriate and unsettle your enemy.

The ideas in this book turn Christian values on their head - what church would embrace them?

Well, for one example, the church in Corinth did. The church to which Paul addressed the letter we read from today was divided into factions, arguing against each other about who were “real Christians” or the best Christians. There is jealousy and fighting, they consider other members of the congregation enemies and try to undermine each other. They jockey for power, each clique claiming to be closer to truth than the others. They are bragging. They are filing lawsuits against each other.

My goodness, they are so divided that even when they gather for a “community meal” they let some go hungry and others get drunk with excess.

So Paul teaches them about spiritual gifts: wisdom, knowledge, healing, prophecy, etc. (These are some of the things they had been bragging about, apparently.) He teaches them that all these gifts come from the Spirit and each is valuable and useful for the common good. But because they are so divided and have used their flawed understanding of baptism and Christian community to break each other down, he also gives them a beautiful teaching about the thing that makes all of these gifts work. He teaches them about love.

This passage from 1 Corinthians is often read at weddings and funerals, times when we are celebrating our close relationships with one another. Often, in those settings, we forget that these words were written to people who were having a hard time staying together.

Outside the context of the church in Corinth, it might sound like Paul is holding up love as another virtue or another spiritual gift. But in the context of this broken community, he is reminding them (and us) that love is the way God intends for us to practice those gifts.

First, Paul tells them that their spiritual gifts amount to nothing without love. Nothing. These spiritual gifts are meant to build up the community and will only do that when used in love. All the things of which they currently have the most pride - are nothing.

Then he tells them what love is. It isn't a feeling. It has nothing to do with feeling good or being happy.

Love is a way of being and a way of acting in the world that is oriented toward the well-being of others. And the way Paul describes love makes it clear it is the opposite of what the Corinthian church is doing.

- They are not patient with each other
- They are not kind to each other.

- They are jealous, boastful, and arrogant.
- They are insisting on their own way and treating people who disagree with them as enemies.
- The things they are doing are not love.
- Everything love is, they are not.

Even in the first century in Greece, the folks in Corinth were living by the 48 Laws of Power instead of by the Law of Love.

Law 2: Never put too much trust in friends

Law 6: Court attention at all cost

Law 27: Take advantage of people's need to believe in something - and make them believe in you

And friends, we know this is happening in the church today. People are trying to bring the rules of worldly power into God's mission to redeem creation. We keep trying to make it about us.

It has been happening since the very beginning when our faith tradition was a small band of outsiders. The motivations of the fractious Corinthian church are the same as the motivations of Christians today when we fight and denigrate each other - we want to be right and powerful and honored. We want this at the expense of our friends and community and our own well-being. And so we demonize those in other denominations or people in our own tradition who see things differently. We align our faith tradition with our inherently combative political systems and treat each other as adversaries. We create conflict along lines of race, ethnicity, gender, language, class, political opinion - really any division we can think of. We amputate ourselves from the one body of Christ.

It's as if each faction within the church is certain they know what God wants and what the church should be. Paul gives a pretty clear answer to that kind of thinking - and he does it lovingly.

They all have amazing gifts from God, he reminds them, gifts that allow them to do wonderful things in their community. But their gifts and their efforts are nothing if that's all they have. No amount of knowledge, insight, power, or generosity will lift them up from nothing.

Moreover, he holds up love -the thing they are not doing - as the one thing that will enable their gifts to work for God's mission. The arrogance of believing in the supremacy of their own opinions is a noisy gong. Love is, in fact, the antidote to the divisiveness they are perpetrating.

In our flawed humanity, we often try to complicate things. We make 48 Laws of Power when we really only need one Law - the Law of Love.

Human power and strategies, books and videos, daily regimens and classes will all end.

They are all nothing, really.

What lasts is love.

This teaching invites us to see ourselves and our spiritual gifts not as things that define us and set us apart, but rather as blessings for the whole community. The whole body. We are not in competition with each other for the love of God or to be the bearer of the best spiritual gift or the most faithful Christian. We are people loved by God who are called to use ourselves, souls, and bodies so that other people know they are also loved.

Bear all things, believe all things, hope all things, endure all things.
Whatever you do, do it with love.
It's really that simple.
Amen.