

Plain and Simple

What does it take to join the club?

The Almeda Library Society at Hamilton High School in Syracuse, New York, sounds like a worthy club. It organizes community service projects and an annual dance for the students. I gather that membership in this all-female extra-curricular organization is something to be desired. Maybe that's why those who are admitted are willing to undergo a certain measure of embarrassment – if not to say humiliation – during the induction process.

It's all on the videos. They went viral, I gather. One video shows teenage girls being blindfolded and told to drop to the floor on their hands and knees, and then to crawl on their stomachs through the halls of Hamilton High. Another video shows the young women being led into the boy's bathroom, right up to the urinals. They remove their blindfolds to find the cameras rolling.

Apparently, it's called a "trust walk."

The initiation tradition dates back decades, and I'm sure it's all meant to be good fun. Much the same could be said about initiation ceremonies into all-male clubs, although they tend to be less demure.

Now that parents have seen the videos, I am guessing that a different tradition has become established at Hamilton High, but the question remains: What does it take to belong?

As a young student of theology, John Wesley wanted very earnestly to belong to what we might call the club of "real" Christians. With his brother Charles, he drew around him at Oxford a group of young men who were soon dubbed "the Holy Club." With a strenuous effort of the will, John, Charles, and their friends sought to impose on themselves the highest possible standard for Christian conduct. Unfortunately – and not surprisingly – there was little peace or joy in the enterprise. Nobody could accuse the Holy Club of hazing. On the other hand, nobody could call them a barrel of fun, either.

John and Charles traveled across England to visit William Law, a famous cleric and mystic, who wrote a book that remains a classic of Christian spiritual devotion: *A Serious Call to a Devout and Holy Life*. To their astonishment, William Law told the Wesley brothers they were trying to make something complicated and burdensome out of the Christian faith.

“Religion is the plainest and simplest thing in the world,” William Law said. “It is just this: *We love because he first loved us.*”

We love because God first loved us: the plainest and simplest thing in the world.

We Christians don’t claim to know much about God in God’s essence, wrapped in majesty and mystery. We just know about how God is toward humanity -- that God loves us. We know about another world before and around and after this one, but mostly we focus on being loved and loving here and now, in this world. We know about fear, but we believe that perfect love casts out fear. We know about law, but we insist that love fulfills the law.

And how do we know? Because of Jesus.

“Beloved,” says the elder of I John, **“God’s love was revealed among us in this way: God sent his only son into the world so that we might live through him. In this is love, not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins.”**

God made the first move. God came among us to share our lot, to walk in our shoes, to stand by the graves of our loved ones, to share our hopes for our children, to be with us in our darkest moments. In Jesus, God shares even our fear that we are alone in the universe, cut off from God and one another.

Jesus came not as the accuser, the one who condemns, but as the agent of atonement. God in Christ identifies with us in our deepest need, taking upon himself the consequence of our shortcomings. **“In this is love, not that we loved God, but that God loved us.”**

Love “so amazing, so divine” calls for a response. **“Beloved, since God loved us so much . . . we should love God back.** That is profoundly true, but that is not how the rest of the verse runs. When we try to love God back, God is not there. God is beyond our grasp, transcendent, “immortal, invisible, hid from our eyes.”

Incarnate love requires an *incarnate* response. **“Since God loved us so much, we ought to love one another. No one has ever seen God, but if we love one another, God lives in us, and his love is perfected in us.”**

Ours is an easy club to join – too easy, many people say. All we have to do is to admit that we have no credentials for membership. To stay in the club all we have to do is to love one another. I think we all would agree that it would be much easier if the bylaws required us to pay dues instead.

Our world is terribly confused about love. I read about some graffiti on a restroom wall: “Love is all I want.” Underneath someone else had scrawled, “Sex is all you get.” Confusing.

The love called forth by the gospel is so unique that the early Christians had to appropriate a rarely used, colorless word in Greek and load it up with new meaning. That word is *agape*. It means self-giving love, sacrificial love – the kind of love that one gives without expecting anything else in return, the kind of love that doesn’t keep score. It’s the love we see at work in Jesus Christ. And when we Christians are on our game, it’s the love we see in the church.

Simple, but not easy, or haven’t you noticed? Loving one another is a messy business, partly because it involves loving the very people whom we most fear, or resent, or envy, the folks who bring out the worst, as well as the best, in us, in much the same way that Jesus brought out the best and the worst in people.

Beloved, since God loved us so much, we ought to love the folks who rub us the wrong way, who get under our skin, who embarrass us with their petty plays for power and their acts of conspicuous piety.

Since God loved us so much, we ought to live in community with the very sinners who expose our own impatience, frustration, and hard-heartedness. There is no church that is not composed of sinners, and there is no way to be the church without loving sinners.

That may be the plainest and simplest thing in the world, but it's not the easiest, is it? Take the case of Tabitha McAbe, brainchild of Terra Elan McVoy, and the main character in the first of six novels Terra has written with young adult readers in mind. (I don't usually plug writers, but this one grew up in this congregation.)

Tabitha is fifteen. She has four "BFF's" ("best friends forever" for those of you who don't speak the lingo). They all wear purity rings as symbols of an important vow they have made. In the parlance of my teenage years, they're "saving themselves for marriage," or as some like to say, exercising "chastity in singleness." Generally speaking, that's a very good thing.

Then one of her friends breaks her vow, and Tabitha struggles to figure out how to be faithful when "love" and "purity" seem to collide. Should Tabitha turn her back on her friend for breaking her promise? Can you love someone even when you don't approve of the choices she has made?

If you want to know what Tabitha decided, you'll have to buy Terra's book. The point is, it's a messy business, this business of loving one another. It helps to get a lot of practice by growing up in a church that works at it.

Tabitha, the heroine of Terra's novel, seems to have learned something from her favorite Sunday School teachers, Mr. and Mrs. Westfall. (The names have been changed to protect the virtuous.) She's learned that the Christian faith doesn't require us to know all the answers. Instead it calls us to love one another as God loves us. Plain and simple, but not painless and simplistic.

Jesus didn't say, "Believe this and that about me. Swallow this proposition. Memorize this truth. Wear this ring." He said, "**Follow me. Abide in me. Love one another as I have loved you.**"

The writer of the letter we call I John has some pretty harsh things to say about his fellow Christians. He knows full well how nasty we can be to one another. And yet he insists that if Christians don't love one another, their claims to love God are a lie.

So, John and Charles Wesley, *chill out, dudes*. Being a follower of Jesus is challenge enough without turning it into a graduate course for high achievers. The church is not a holy club. It's a hospital for recovering sinners. Being Christian is the plainest and simplest – and sometimes the hardest – thing in the world:

We love because God first loved us.

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(This sermon was inspired by a sermon I heard preached by Al Wynn, pastor of Second Presbyterian Church of Richmond, Virginia, back in the 1970's. Although I can't provide a footnote, I acknowledge that the best portions must have originated with him.)