

On Prizing One Another

As Christian communities we have not found ways to ‘hear one another into speech’ about who we are, because we have been too focused on what Rogers identifies as judgement, diagnosis, appraisal and evaluation. We have set up a relational ideal (which has a historicity all of its own, but most recently it has been heterosexual monogamous marriage), against which all other so-called ‘lifestyles’ are measured. Being tested and found wanting is something we do to ourselves as well as experiencing it from without, because the forms of control upon us are subtle and internalised. We end up with the ironic spectre of a faith that preaches a God of unconditional love – even unto death – whilst seeing only clay jars and totally missing the treasure.

Rogers has a word for that treasure, and how we value it. He calls it ‘prizing another’. He says, ‘I feel enriched when I can truly prize or care for or love another person and when I can let that feeling flow out to that person...I have too slowly learned that tender, positive feelings are not dangerous either to give or to receive.’ (5) And the effects he describes from the receiver’s perspective are equally dramatic, ‘When I am prized, I blossom and expand, I am an interesting individual. In a hostile or unappreciative group, I am just not much of anything....Thus, prizing or loving and being prized or loved is experienced as growth enhancing. A person who is loved appreciatively, not possessively, blooms and develops his own unique self. The person who loves nonpossessively is himself enriched. This, at least, has been my experience.’ (6)

What if ‘mutual prizing’ were to become our overarching criterion for recognising a good relationship when we see one? Rather than seeing only the likely life-span of the relationship, or the gender of the people involved. Surely Megan and Nel would represent something exemplary in such a schema for, as Megan expressed it to Nel in her wedding vows, ‘With you I feel alive, at rest and free. With you I feel safe, cared for and protected, loved, listened to, and trusted, able to grow, to try, to make mistakes, to let go, to be myself. With you I feel precious and beautiful.’

We need to work towards faith communities replete with people who feel unconditionally loved by God in all aspects of our being, such that we overflow with unconditional love for others. We will love our bodies, accept them just as they are, care for and cherish them because they are fearfully and wonderfully made, and we will enjoy our embodiment. We will recognise our diversity and that we are interdependent and all have gifts and needs. Those who cannot ‘enjoy’ their embodiment because of chronic pain or disability will at least feel that they have a vital place in our community, and that we would be impoverished and incomplete without them. We will be a people who begin from an assumption that every person’s sexuality is God’s gift to them, in its uniqueness and in its mysterious and wonderful complexity. When we speak of it we will treat it as holy and sacred ground – to be approached with awe and wonder; as something intriguing, something to learn ever more of. And in seeking to learn, we will be able to speak freely and honestly because we are looking at God’s creation together, and there can be no condemnation. We will notice and share our attractions and our desires; reflect on our commitments and the challenges to them that new forms of intimacy may bring. We will be able to support one another and reflect together on how to live out our feelings appropriately and express ourselves authentically. All of this becomes possible only when we begin by prizing, not judging.