

Love in Steubenville

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March 26, 2013

Last week in my Christian Ethics course we talked about love.

God's love. Human love. Love and sexuality. Loving the whole of God's creation.

I shared with my students a favorite quote from a favorite writer, [Wendell Berry](#):

I take literally the statement in the Gospel of John that God loves the world. I believe that the world was created and approved by love, that it subsists, coheres, and endures by love, and that, insofar as it is redeemable, it can be redeemed only by love. I believe that divine love, incarnate and indwelling in the world, summons the world always toward wholeness, which ultimately is reconciliation and atonement with God.

And the author of our course text, [Paul Wadell](#), reminded us — among many other things in his robust treatment of the subject — that genuine love is always directed toward the well-being of others. To love genuinely, truly, fully is to desire and pursue the flourishing, prospering, thriving of that which (whom) one loves.

True enough.

Nothing to disagree with here.

But I've been thinking about love, theologically construed, with its many rich associations, in all of its messy, complicated beauty in light of the news about the Steubenville rape trial.

It's true that the media coverage of the verdict in the case was troubling for its one-sided focus on the "ruined lives" of the convicted rapists, sixteen-year-old boys with ["promising futures."](#)

It's true that we need more cultural conversations, both small- and large-scale, about the relationship between sex and structural power, between rape and

[“consent.”](#)

It’s true that well-meaning sympathy for female victims of sexual assault often unwittingly reinforces America’s deeply disturbing [rape culture](#).

It may be true that the defendants deserved harsher sentences. Maybe.

But it’s also true, I think, that in our responses to this news we would do well to consider what it might mean to attend to the humanity, the brokenness, the possibilities for healing and redemption for the two boys.

In most of the angry reactions to the verdict and the media’s coverage of it, Ma’lik Richmond and Trent Mays have been used as props for [moral outrage](#) scoring points. They have served to uphold one of the cardinal rules for how, as citizen-spectators, we are allowed to engage American jurisprudence: you can be on the side of the victim or on the side of the perpetrator; but never on the side of both.

Earlier this semester in Christian Ethics we watched a video interview of [Sr. Helen Prejean](#) who argued that indeed it is possible to be on both sides. Necessary, even.

“When you descend down deep to where God is,” [she says](#), “that’s upholding the dignity of life on both sides.”

Jesus, Sr. Helen goes on to say, always has one arm around the victim, holding him or her as a beloved child of God, and the other around the perpetrator, saying, *“He or she has done an unspeakable crime, but this too is my beloved son or daughter. Don’t abandon them.”*

In other words: love them.

This week, Holy Week in the Christian Year, we will remember and relive the scandalous ways of love. A love that:

washes the feet of betrayers and those who would curse and deny a friend

. . .

refuses to respond in kind to brutality and violence . . .

looks with tender forgiveness on wrongdoers who know not what they do .

. .

assures a convicted criminal of his place in paradise . . .

surrenders everything to the divine will that “summons the world always toward wholeness” (Berry).

We will hear the familiar story of this scandalous love this week. We will act it out as we wash each other’s feet on Holy Thursday, find our place in the drama of Jesus’ passion on Good Friday, and sing of love’s triumph at the Great Vigil of Easter.

But will we hear this story of scandalous love as a summons to our own participation in God’s reconciling work in the world?

Jesus’ outstretched arms on the cross embrace thieves and thugs, the woefully misguided, and *us*. Is it possible that we might learn to love scandalously, to pursue — however costly, inconvenient, or counterintuitive — the well-being of all others?

Originally posted at [Intersections](#)