



A Fishy Love

Clay Nelson © 30 April 2017

When I was six we got our first television. I think that was about five years before television made it to New Zealand. It was love at first sight. It was beautiful in its large wooden cabinet with its much smaller tube. The black and white images were magical. It changed my daily routine. After school I watched the Mickey Mouse Club, followed by Superman. On Friday night there was Flash Gordon. Saturday morning there were cartoons and all my western heroes. I loved TV everyday of the week, except Sunday mornings. There were only three channels. Two had interviews of people in the news. I was not yet a political junkie, so that left the third station, which had religious programming.

I vividly remember one Sunday watching an Oral Roberts' tent revival called *The Abundant Life*. Oral Roberts was a Pentecostal preacher from Oklahoma who had a mobile tent from which he conducted evangelistic and faith-healing crusades around America. The tent could hold 3000 people. But with the advent of television his audience grew exponentially. He was good entertainment. Even in black and white he was colourful. He would call people on stage, many of them on crutches, ask them if they wanted to be healed, place his hand on their forehead and demand the devil leave them. They would collapse in a heap. He would help them up and ask if they were healed. They always said yes, throw their crutches on a growing pile next to the stage and walk off unaided praising God. Even at the age of six I knew it was all crap, but very profitable crap by the amount of money brought to the stage at the love offering.

Before he hit Sunday morning prime time, Roberts struggled as a part-time preacher in Oklahoma. But at the age of 29 Roberts picked up his Bible and it fell open at the Third Letter of John where verse two read: "I wish above all things that thou mayest prosper and be in health, even as thy soul prospereth." The next day, he said, he bought a Buick and God appeared, directing him to heal the sick.

A little known fact is that every preacher has only one sermon. Roberts' one sermon was based on this biblical passage. His message was seed faith. It was a faith based on the parable of the small mustard seed. With faith as small as a mustard seed all things were possible. What Roberts preached was a prosperity gospel. What that seed sprouted was wealth and health, but mostly for Roberts. The seed was to send the Oral Roberts Evangelisation Association a small financial contribution and the giver would become prosperous and healthy and have abundant life. As a pioneer in televangelism, his ministries reached millions of followers worldwide, spanning a period of over six decades. He raised enough monies to build a university and a hospital.

There is much more to his story, a lot of it besmirched by scandal and tragedy, but the point this morning is he made money and religion unholy bedfellows. He inspired a

whole generation of televangelists who followed his formula. In New Zealand we have “Bishop” Brian Tamaki. I’ve met him twice. The first time was at the funeral of a prominent Catholic priest active in social justice who would have despised his “gospel”. It is traditional for clergy to walk in procession behind the coffin. Brian was there in his expensive Italian suit and Rolex while the rest of us were in simple white robes. I was not impressed. The second time was on Maori TV’s Media Take panel to discuss being a Christian nation. He was there with his wife and he seemed to know the optics weren’t right for lavish dress. He was much more informal in an open collar shirt. But many of us have seen the photos of his congregation putting large denominations they can’t afford on his stage in hopes of being able to dress like him, live in luxurious homes, drive expensive cars and take lavish holidays.

I am disgusted by those who use faith as a manipulative business model for their own benefit. My revulsion makes it difficult for me to preach on what we here call Canvass Sunday and what I am used to calling it in Anglican circles, Stewardship Sunday.

My practical side gives me an excuse for not preaching about the financial needs of the congregation. First, it is more than embarrassing that in a small congregation a large percentage of the budget is for my half-time salary. It is like having to sing for my supper or at least my lunch. I am repelled. I would starve as a salesman, because I suck at closing the deal. My father once told my partner, “Don’t start a business with Clay because he will give away the store.”

The second excuse, it is the responsibility of the Management Committee to make sure we can afford “to keep the lights on.” Let them explain, as they already have, how much it costs and then I can avoid dealing with it. Keep it simple and let Canvass Sunday just be about paying the bills, but this preacher’s one sermon won’t let me leave it alone.

I have preached with reservations many, many stewardship sermons over the years and for me it has never been about money. Nor is it because the bible says we are to tithe. Nor is it because it is a down payment for getting into heaven. Nor is it about paying for your sins. It is not blood money. Nor is it a transaction that promises you prosperity. What you give has to be given freely and joyfully, with no strings attached. Otherwise it is a fishy kind of love.

Dr Andrew Twerski, an Hassidic Rabbi and Psychiatrist, gives a talk on Youtube about love, a word that in our culture that has almost lost its meaning. In it he tells an interesting story about a rebbe, a Jewish spiritual teacher, who came across a young man who was clearly enjoying a dish of fish that he was eating. He asked the young man, “Why are you eating that fish?” The young man says, “Because I love fish.” The rebbe answers, “Oh... you love the fish. That’s why you took it out of the water, killed it and boiled it. Don’t tell me you love the fish. You love yourself because the fish tastes good to you, therefore you took it out of the water and killed it and boiled it.”

So much of what we call love is fish love. And so a young couple, a young man and a young woman fall in love. What does that mean? He saw in this woman someone who he felt could provide him with all his physical and emotional needs. And she felt in this man was somebody she felt could do the same for her. It felt like love, but each

was looking out for their own needs. It's not love for the other. The other person becomes a vehicle for his or her gratification. Too much of what we call love is fish love—an internal love of self.

Love is different. It isn't about what I am going to get but what I am going to give.

Ethicist Rabbi Dessler said, "People make a serious mistake in thinking that you give to those you love. The real answer is you love those to whom you give." His point is if I give something to you I've invested myself in you. Since self-love is a given, everybody loves themselves. Now that part of me has become in you. There's part of me in you that I love.

True love is a love of giving, not a love of receiving.

In most Unitarian churches there is no mention of sacraments, although there are exceptions. What is a sacrament? The traditional understanding is it is an outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual grace. In Christianity there are two primary sacraments: baptism and communion. The outward sign of baptism is that water is poured over a child three times in the name of the Trinity. The inward and spiritual grace is that the person becomes an acknowledged child of God and member of the household of God, the church.

The outward sign of communion is eating bread and drinking wine. The inward and spiritual grace is becoming one with Jesus and all those who have done the same in the past, present and future. In both cases, the sacrament provides people with an identity. It tells them who they are. That guides how they are to live.

For the last three years I have preached that we have two sacraments at the Auckland Unitarian Church: The sacrament of hospitality and the sacrament of generosity. They are closely related. The outward and visible sign of hospitality is morning tea. It is more than bringing goodies to share with our tea and coffee. It is physically being here to meet and greet visitors and those looking for a spiritual home. That sacrament requires your presence so relationships can be established and expanded. If you are not here that does not happen. The inward and spiritual grace is that being vulnerable and welcoming enriches your life and the lives of those you meet. It is a sacrament of connection. Those connections make us stronger as a community.

The outward and visible sign of the sacrament of generosity is the money you put in the offertory bag or pay through electronic funds transfer, and the time you give to our common ministry. The inward and spiritual grace is that you are investing yourself without strings attached to something bigger than yourself, our beloved community. You are not just connecting to those in the past that made this place and community possible. You are not just connecting with those who are here now, people with whom you are one. You are also keeping alive a dream. You are connecting with our grandchildren and great-grandchildren who, because of our sacrament of generosity, will hear the minister begin worship by saying that for the past 230 years Auckland Unitarians have been making this space sacred. You are investing in your immortality.

This year when you are asked to pledge, don't pledge to make sure we meet our budget. Although we are faced with a challenging goal this year, I trust we will get

there. By all appearances we have done so successfully for the last 115 years. Pledge because your investment makes you a part of this place. I don't want you to give because you love who we are. I want you to love Auckland Unitarians because it is who you are. No other reason will make a difference in your life. Any other reason is fishy love.