



Reckless Love, week four: Openhearted Love

In this week's chapter, Openhearted Love, the author, Rev. Tom Berlin, challenges us to open our hearts and let God's love spill out. He says, "Jesus is trying to help us experience openhearted living. Closed hearts squelch our ability to love God and love our neighbor." In this discussion of chapter four of Reckless Love, Rev. Ben Ingebretson, who serves as the director of new church development for the Dakotas-Minnesota Area, and Rev. Dan Johnson, who serves as the superintendent for the Twin Cities District of the Minnesota Conference, discuss how this chapter spoke to each of them.

Rev. Dan Johnson: The chapter we have been looking at for this week, reminds me of an experience from my childhood. I love going to visit my grandparents in Little Falls, Minnesota.

If we arrived the right day, I could help Grandma Hazel with her laundry. It was a different experience than what you and I might have with laundry these days. We would use here 1940's vintage, wringer, washing machine.

It was in the breezeway between the house and the garage. So we would pull it out into position and fill it up with a hose. We would get the clothes in there and then put in the soap. Then we would flip the switch to start. The agitator would not only move the clothes to get them clean, but it also shook the whole washing machine.

There were so much shaking and agitation that my job was to hold this stick, and periodically I would jam the clothes back down in the wringer-washer. I had to kind of keep them in place. The agitation cleaned the clothes, but they would emerge to the surface. Pushing the clothes with the stick kept them submerged in the water.

I enjoyed being able to take each piece of clothing out and feed it through the rollers of the wringer, carefully, without catching your fingers in the rollers. They would come out on the other side, entirely squeezed out. All of the water and dirt was left behind. Then we would go out, hang them, and freshen on the clothesline.

The dimensions of Grandma Hazel's wringer-washer were a big part of what this chapter is all about. The chapter is about agitation, pushing us out of our comfort zones, and taking some risks. We risk engaging in spiritual disciplines that end up leading to wholeness and refreshment in our lives.

Rev. Ben Ingebretson: That is a powerful metaphor. That makes me think about a relationship I had, back a few years, where I experienced agitation. I fell into a relationship with a guy by the name of Walt. He was a crusty, kind of a tough guy to be in a relationship

He was part of a local group called The Free Thought Association. The group expressed their inability to commit to any faith. The members were atheist or agnostic. In fact, Walt was evangelistic about it. What he was doing was purchasing atheist and agnostic books and donating them to all of the local libraries. He was out there crusading.

I wondered, can I build a relationship with Walt? When Tom Berlin wrote, "Jesus does not suggest that we love our neighbor, He commands it. (p. 79)." It made me think of my connection with Walt. I wonder, can I be obedient to that command?

It makes me so aware of how hard that is. I am pretty good at loving people like me, but there are not many of me around. Can I expand, and stretch, and be as generous God as is? That is an enormous challenge. It was for me with Walt.

Rev. Dan Johnson: What strikes me, as you share the story of Walt, if God's grace and love are broad enough to reach all of us, to show our love to God, we need to love those people that God loves. Not love just that are in our sphere, but everyone.

Rev. Ben Ingebretson: Walt would invite me to the gathering of folks that shared his outlook on life. It was a gathering of the Free Thought Association. I remember sitting there and feeling the agitation within myself. There were a lot of things that were said that I was uncomfortable with.

There was not only a mental kind of dissonance but an emotional, visceral feeling. A feeling like I don't belong here; this is awkward. To sit there with that feeling, to stay in a relationship with Walt, was a discipline for a period of time.

Something happened, I got to like Walt. I also got to like Walt's friends. We did not agree on a whole lot. We found some things we did agree. We found out that we could be in a relationship. They knew who I was. I knew who they were.

I think God did something amazing in me. It drew me to another quote from Tom Berlin, "Jesus is not boxed in by stereotypes. (p. 77)" I had a stereotype of Walt. I believed he would not even what to be in a relationship with me. I found out that I was terribly mistaken. Isn't that what stereotypes do? They mess with us.

Rev. Dan Johnson: It is interesting, when you use that phrase, agitation, the agitation stirred something in your own heart that caused you to think about things differently. At the same time, that agitation forced you to be in contact. It was a sense of being drawn apart and back into a relationship, all at the same time.

Rev. Ben Ingebretson: I think God had to squeeze some stuff out of me if I can extend the metaphor of the washing machine. He had to push out a little of my resistance that I was feeling. I was thinking and feeling, "This is hard being in a relationship with you, Walt." God squeezed out my resistance. I don't regret that one bit.

I think I am a better follower of Jesus. I am a long way from perfect. I think I am a little bit more aware of what God has to keep doing in me, in my relationship with lots of folks. In needs to happen for the Holy Spirit to continue working in my life.

Rev. Dan Johnson: What are some of the spiritual disciplines that are important to you, that you think would benefit others?

Rev. Ben Ingebretson: There are certainly some things we have to stop doing. We have to launder our language. I really can't refer to those people. We have to be very careful; no one exists as a stereotypical person. Everyone is unique, and their situation is individual.

I had to work on that. I am a long way from perfect. There are probably other things we have to stop doing. For me, the biggest, the think I feel strongest about, is the thing we have to do proactively. We have to build relationships. We need to put ourselves out there.

Rev. Dan Johnson: That is vulnerability. That is a sense of openness and confession. It is an opportunity to begin to see others as a child of God rather than someone who is outside of me.

Rev. Ben Ingebretson: We have to sit with that when it doesn't feel real good, believing that it is part of the process. The feelings are part of the process that God takes us through in order for us to be in a relationship and see God is at work.

Rev. Dan Johnson: Let's look back to the wringer-washer image, there is a point in which you go through the wringer, but there is a sense of renewal when you are hung out on the line. There is the freshness of the restoration. The freshness of God's spirit. We are renewed. We have confessed. We have vulnerable. We have been intentional about our connections with others. We find ourselves renewed.