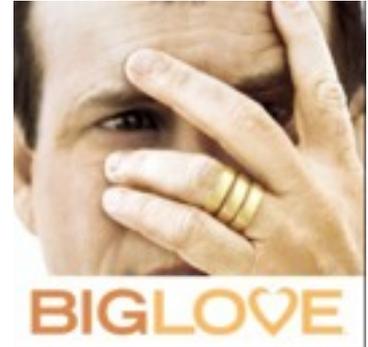


Big Love

John 8:31-36

Big Love is a TV drama that screened over the last years on the SBS network. It tells the story of a Mormon man, Bill Henrickson. Bill lives in Salt Lake City, the headquarters of the Mormon church. He's a successful businessman, and runs a chain of home improvement stores, called Henrickson's Home Plus, an ironic title given Bill's home life. Bill is a polygamist, a member of an underground movement within Mormonism that allows men to have multiple wives. Bill has three wives; Barb, Nicki and Margene, and multiple children.



Big Love follows his struggle to maintain a happy family life while keeping his illegal lifestyle a secret. Not surprisingly, there are simmering tensions between the three wives. Barb is the first wife, and the anchor of the family, but she has mixed feelings about the concept of polygamy, and only her love for Bill makes her stay. Second wife Nicki is the daughter of a Mormon prophet, and grew up in a religious compound, and has struggled to make the transition into suburban life. And Margene, the third wife, 21 years old, struggles to find her place within the family, as both Barb and Nicki look down on her due to her immaturity.

Bill needs a big love to deal with these tensions. But this is a love that dare not speak its name, because of the shame and the stigma attached to it. Is his love big enough to deal with the uncertainty, insecurity and jealousies that are rampant in this situation? Those of you who watched the five series right through will know the answer.

Big Love. Our lives are complex too. Not for the same reasons, of course, but we all know how hard it is to love, and keep on loving, in a way that maintains relationships and honours those in our lives. We all harbour secrets that militate against loving others, self-love that shuts others out or distorts our ability to have time and energy for others. And sometimes it might not be self-love but self-hate, a sense of loathing for who we are, or for what we have done in the past, and we're stuck. We need a bigger love than we are capable of.

This day, Reformation Sunday, celebrates a big love, God's love. This is the love that Luther rediscovered through wrestling with the word of God. Tormented by his own lovelessness and lack of obedience, Luther lashed out at a God who he had been taught demanded perfection of us, but who condemned us for our failures. This was the breeding ground for despair. And the perfect spiritual storm.

But it wasn't the truth about God. That only came through God's Word breaking through into Luther's heart. He writes candidly:



“I did not love a just and angry God, but rather hated and murmured against him. Night and day I pondered... [on] the statement, ‘The righteous shall live by faith.’ Then I grasped that the justice of God is that righteousness by which through grace and mercy God justifies us through faith. [At this point] I felt myself to be reborn and to have gone through open doors into paradise.”

“This righteousness,” the Apostle Paul writes, “is given through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe... all are justified freely by God’s grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus. God presented Christ as a sacrifice of atonement through the shedding of his blood.”



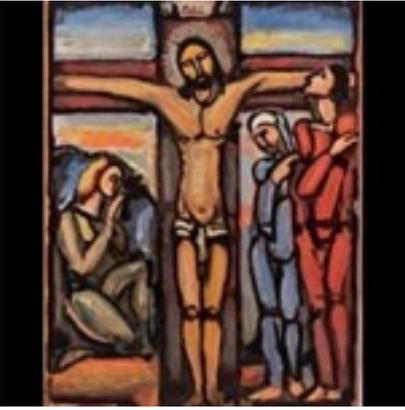
This is big love. But nothing like the love displayed in the TV series of the same name, which was shot through with contradictions, jealousies, self-interest and shame. This is big love, not just bigger by degree but completely different by nature. It transcends the limit of human love. It doesn’t look for what it can get, but it gives, and gives, and gives. And it suffers, and suffers, and suffers. Big love is Jesus hanging dead for the lovelessness of all people. It’s his body as the “sacrifice of atonement.” It’s his blood as the life that is poured out for the freedom of all people. It’s the guilty call pronounced by his Father on his Son, the innocent one. It’s the blessed exchange of his life for our death, his perfection for our failure and his love for our hate. This is big love, and comes in the shape of a shocking, shameful cross.

Big love changes everything. It’s the way that Jesus spoke to the woman caught in the act of adultery. As the Pharisees surrounded her to instigate her stoning, like vultures circling around a dying animal, Jesus demonstrates this love. He issues a word of challenge to her accusers: “Let any one of you without sin be the first to throw a stone at her.”

There is only one without sin there, and he has every right to follow God’s law through to its conclusion. But in gracious love that prefigures the cross toward which Jesus was walking, he says, “Neither do I condemn you... Go now and leave your life of sin.” “What you know about love is need. You want to know that you are someone and not a nobody. You’ve gone looking for love in the arms of others. They’ve used you and discarded you, and you’ve felt empty, shamed, utterly loveless. But I come to show you true love, big love, sacrificial love, love which will change the course of your life forever.”



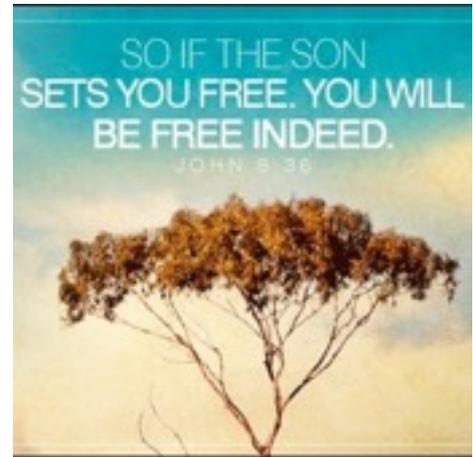
What Jesus might have said to this woman he says to us. My love is bigger than your needs, stronger than your failures. It changes everything. In the light of the cross, you are set free from a thin, anaemic love that comes from within you. In your baptism into my death and resurrection, you’ve been given a big, robust, unquenchable love.



Celtic spirituality speaks about thin places, where the boundary between heaven and earth is especially thin, places where the divine is more readily experienced. The thinnest place of all is not a place, but a person: Jesus, God incarnate. And his cross is where the love of God is closest to us. Through the cross we have been drawn into the big love of God. Now our lives are the places where this big love is displayed.

Some months ago Pastor Peter Steicke came to St Paul's and spoke about Christian leadership. I remember vividly his description of what it meant to be a disciple of Jesus. We walk through the cross from the narrow side. We come from the place where are so painfully aware of our failures and flaws, the sin which binds us. We know that we owe God a debt of perfection. "The thin side of the cross is language of obligation." I should. I must. But passing through the cross means leaving the thin behind, and learning to live of the wide, free side, in the land of God's big love. That's the place where God's love is set loose through us.

In the terms of Jesus' words today, it's the difference between being a slave and a son. "Everyone who sins is a slave to sin. Now a slave has no permanent place in the family, but a son belongs to it forever. So if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed." The gift of the cross is the big love of God, love that is inexhaustible, love that we can never drain to the dregs, a love that is stronger than our weakness. God the Father loves us more than any human being could love us. He loves us not because we are lovely, but because he is big love. Freedom means living, loving in that truth. Caring for others not because we must, because God wants us to and we scared of the consequences if we don't, but because we want to, motivated by the love of Jesus.



If we are looking to re-claim our reformation heritage again today, then the best thing we can do is focus on the Father's big love for us, displayed in the most amazing way in the cross of Jesus, and given to us through the Holy Spirit, God alive in our lives. We honour those who come before us, and ultimately God, by living on the spacious side of the cross, never losing sight of Jesus who suffered, died and rose again for us, and resolving each day to live in his total freedom to love others because we now can, not because we have to. Amen.