

Love Is Not a Feeling

A Sermon by Rev. Erik Buss

How often have you heard someone say, or said yourself, "I know I ought to do it, but I just don't feel like it"? And how often have you heard, "We fell out of love. The feeling was gone"? Many things seem exciting and fun at the beginning, but become chores later. The thrill of a new project or hobby fades; a friendship or a marriage seems less and less fulfilling. When the feeling goes away, our most common response is to stop doing what we were doing and give up on the friendship, the marriage, the job.

On the other hand, when feelings are strong, we will do anything to make sure we keep them going. How often have we heard people explaining what they did by saying, "The feeling was right," or "I just felt that it was the right thing to do?" In our culture, strong feelings are used to justify just about every possible action, from angry words to spending money we don't have to committing adultery. The phrase, "I couldn't help myself," is used so often it has become a cliché.

For many of us, feelings dictate how we live our lives. We use them to motivate us. We use them to decide what we love, who we are, and what we should do. If they are strong, we will do anything to keep them going, and if they are weak, nothing can make us do anything.

This can seem like a very reasonable way to live. Since we are what we love, we might say, our feelings show us who we are. Some have even reasoned that since they want to do something they know is wrong that they must love it, and since they love it they might as well do it. After all, there's no point in pretending to be any better than we really are; that's adding hypocrisy to our list of evils.

The reality is that our feelings do not always tell us what we love, and therefore they should not be a factor in choosing what we should do with our spiritual lives. What we feel is not what we love. Loves do produce feelings, and feelings do help us know what we love, but they can also be misleading. A feeling can be good, yet come from a good or an evil love. Take romantic passion for example. It always feels good. If it comes from a chaste love, and is expressed only within the bonds of marriage, that good feeling shows a good love. On the other hand, that

same feeling could come from a horrible selfish desire. The feeling alone will not tell us which love gave rise to it.

Similarly, a feeling of sadness may come from a good or a bad love. A person could feel sad because a good love has been thwarted, or because he has lost someone he loves. Or he could be sad because an evil love has been foiled, and he is pouting.

It's easy to see how far apart our loves and feelings often are when we are angry. Think about a time when you were angry with someone you love very dearly. In that time of anger, you may have felt like hurting that person, that you hated him, maybe even that you wished he was dead. But did that feeling of anger and hatred mean you didn't love him anymore? Of course not! In an hour, or even fifteen minutes, the feeling was probably totally gone, and you were ready to appreciate and even feel love for the person again. The love was there all along, but you were blind and deaf to it. While it is true that the presence of anger shows that you do not totally love that person, that's no big deal. It just means we aren't perfect, but we knew that already. What is important is for us to recognize that feelings don't necessarily show us what our overall love is.

Several more problems arise from trying to see our loves from our feelings. The first is that there is no one-for-one ratio between feelings and loves. In other words, a strong love will not necessarily show itself as a strong feeling. A deeply held love, like the love of a child or a love of order, may not come to our conscious mind as anything other than a general feeling of contentment and a willingness to fight for something that needs protection. On the other hand, a superficial love may show itself as an almost overwhelming feeling, one which makes it almost impossible to concentrate on anything else. An example of this is sports. Hardly anyone has a deeply held love for sports, but when someone's favorite team loses, it can seem that the whole world collapsed. Based on the feelings he feels, you'd think the world was about to end.

A second problem of trying to discover our loves by means of our feelings is that evil loves create proportionally stronger feelings than good loves do. The reason for this is that the hells try to make that feeling so important to us that it sweeps away all rational thought, and even all free will. They want that feeling to become so important that we will do anything to keep it going. Swedenborg once was allowed to feel what the love of dominating others is like and he said it was the most

delightful feeling he had ever had. What is more, it totally filled his mind. This is how the hells use feelings to manipulate and dominate us. The angels, on the other hand, offer us good feelings in a way that we can freely receive them or reject them as we wish. They don't want to dominate us with feelings.

There is a better way to find out what we really love. We need to look at what we do. What things do we make time for? What things form consistent patterns in our activities? What do we always do no matter how we feel? Love is not so much a feeling as a commitment.

Two stories from the Word can show us how love is a commitment. One is when Abraham is willing to sacrifice Isaac at the Lord's command, even though it clearly hurts him. In the story, the Lord tells Abraham to give up "your son, your only son Isaac, whom you love." What the Lord asks Abraham to do is to make a commitment to Him. Picture Abraham climbing up the mountain and then tying his son onto the altar. He must have felt terrible. But he was committed to the Lord: he did what His God asked rather than obey his paternal feelings. Abraham's commitment to obey the Lord in spite of his feelings showed a greater love to the Lord than any feelings of devotion could.

We can see an even more powerful example of this principle in the Lord's prayer in the garden of Gethsemane. This was probably the low-point of the Lord's life on earth. He had been deserted by the whole Human race; He was about to be deserted by His disciples, and He knew it; even the angels had despaired and were telling Him to give up on humanity. He was totally alone. He felt so bad that He even prayed to His Father, to the soul within Himself, to ask if He had to go through with the trials of the next day. Yet think of the words He said in this low-point of His life: "O My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from Me; nevertheless, not as I will but as You will." Think about that. Even during the most overpowering feelings of loss and loneliness, ones we cannot begin to imagine, the very question He asked to get out of His appointed task is qualified with the commitment to do what is right: nevertheless, not as I will, but as You will. That total commitment to the salvation of each one of us is staggering. No one has ever felt more like giving up, and then no one has ever gone on to give more in spite of His feelings.

The closest we can get to doing what the Lord did is to be willing to lay down our life, either physically or spiritually, for someone else. The Lord said that this is the greatest act of love a person can do. Yet to do it we

have to overcome the strongest feeling we have, which is our desire to preserve our own lives. No one feels like doing this. No one gets up in the morning and decides, "I think I'll lay down my life for my friend today." Rather, when a person or cause is threatened, he sees the need for sacrifice, and acts. True love acts on what it knows to be good, rather than what it simply feels to be good.

These loves, which we develop by our commitments, are what conjoin us to the Lord. There is also a group of passages in the Word for the New Church which state that we are conjoined to Him by what we do. Once we see love as a commitment, these two statements become different ways of stating the same thing. When we feel destructive anger, yet act fairly, we love fairness more than anger. When we control ourselves when we feel like flirting, or testing our power with the opposite sex, we love our spouse and the bonds of marriage more than adultery. On the other hand, when we feel loving toward someone, but don't act kindly to them, we do not love them. Or if we sit in church every Sunday and feel close to the Lord there, yet act selfishly the rest of the week, we don't love the Lord, regardless of what we feel. What we are committed to doing will always show us what we love more accurately than what we feel. This is a wonderful fact, because we can all make ourselves do good deeds, but we have an extremely hard time making ourselves feel good things.

So where does this leave our feelings since they should have nothing to do with how we act? Are they just useless adornments the Lord has given us, something we can't enjoy because we can't trust? The answer is that feelings are not made to show us our loves or to show us what to do.

Our feelings serve two important uses. The first is to stimulate us to think about an issue. If a feeling comes up, we know that some love must be active. That means we need to evaluate what that love is, and see if it runs contrary to our commitments. If we feel a rush of anger coming on, it is a warning either that the hells are attacking us, or that we are feeling a strong desire to protect ourselves or someone we love. That feeling can stimulate us to decide what our commitments are. Similarly, if we feel the strong desire to hug someone, that feeling should prompt us to decide whether the setting is appropriate, and if that would be the most useful thing to do for that person.

But feelings serve one far more important purpose. We can see it from the word used to name feelings in the Word for the New Church: they are called "delights." That word, delights, tells us how we are supposed to use our feelings: we are supposed to enjoy them, delight in them, accept them as a wonderful gift from our God to make our life enjoyable. Once we know that a feeling is from a good love, the Lord wants us to enjoy it.

Until we get to the point where we instinctively know whether feelings are good or bad, in other words, until we become among the very best of the angels, there is another way of judging them. While it is true that the hells are particularly good at manipulating our feelings, they have a much harder time manipulating our thoughts. Therefore we can use our thoughts to judge our feelings. A simple way of doing this is to ask ourselves, "If I follow this feeling out, does it lead me to do good or evil things." If it leads us away from what we know is right, we should shun it, but if it does not, we can enjoy it, even abandon ourselves to it. Using our feelings in this way frees them up to simply delight us.

All feelings do come from loves, but we often can't tell if it is a good or bad love. If we identify ourselves and our loves with what we feel, we give a great victory to the hells because at times they can make us feel just about whatever they want. Although we cannot control the feelings that flow into us, we can control the loves we develop. If we can recognize that love is not a feeling, but a commitment, and that we can choose to love something by deciding to do it no matter what we feel, we will negate the hells' power. We will still feel terrible at times, just as the Lord did while He was on earth. But more and more often we will be able to rise above the strong feelings the hells inspire in us. We will learn that love in the form of commitment is more enduring and more powerful than any feeling we may have. And what is wonderful, we will discover the joy of allowing the good feelings the Lord has given us to delight us with their full power.

Lessons: Genesis 22:1-13; Matt 26:36-46; HH 396; DP 215:9

HH 396 All delights flow forth from love, for that which a person loves he feels to be delightful. No one has any delight from any other source. From this it follows that such as the love is such is the delight.

DP 215:9 It has been granted me to feel the quality of the delight of ruling from the love of self, and also how great it is. I was let into it that I might know this. It was such as to surpass all the delights that are in the world. It was a delight possessing the whole mind from its inmost things to its outermost; but in the body it was felt as something pleasant and agreeable with a feeling of elation in the breast. It was also granted me to perceive that from this delight as from their fountain-head there issued the delights of evils of all kinds, such as adulteries, revenge, fraud, slander, and evil doing in general.