

WAS HESSE'S SIDDHARTHA CAPABLE OF LOVE?

A Sermon by Dean Scotty McLennan
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The story of the Good Samaritanⁱ is one of the most well-known and beloved of the New Testament. At its center lie what Jesus considers the two greatest commandmentsⁱⁱ of the Torah: You shall love the Lord your God,ⁱⁱⁱ and you shall love your neighbor as yourself.^{iv} The hated foreigner, the Samaritan, actively demonstrates neighborly love, which the respected priest and temple functionary, the Levite, do not. Love, I believe, is the central message of the New Testament. But the story of the Good Samaritan has become almost hackneyed in its re-telling, and love has become a nice catch-all word, hard to define with any precision. Sometimes it's useful to step out of the Christian tradition, and out of our cultural context, to shed new light on the most important of our doctrines.

So, today I'd like to discuss with you Hermann Hesse's novel, Siddhartha.^v It's set in India around 500 B.C. at the time of the historic Buddha, Gotama.^{vi} The main character of the novel is not himself the Buddha, but Siddhartha personally meets the Buddha, and in the end he becomes fully enlightened, just like Gotama. Throughout the book Siddhartha struggles with whether or not he's capable of love. As he says to Kamala, a woman with whom he gets involved for a number of years: "Perhaps people like us cannot love. Ordinary people can -- that is their secret." Kamala is a famous courtesan; she sells pleasures of the body. Siddhartha has been a Samana, a wandering ascetic holy man. So, how do these two get involved with each other in the first place, and what can these two lovers possibly teach us about true love?

To explain, let me back up a bit and describe the basic story line of the novel. Siddhartha is born into a wealthy, Hindu Brahmin family. He is handsome, intelligent and well-liked. Yet, as he grows, he increasingly feels discontented with his wealth and privilege and the limits of the knowledge that the wise priestly caste has passed on to him. He also begins "to feel [in the words of the book] that the love of his father and mother, and also the love of his friend Govinda, would not always make him happy, give him peace, satisfy and suffice him."^{vii}

So when some Samanas, nearly naked ascetics, pass through town, with "an atmosphere of still passion, of devastating service, of un pitying self-denial"^{viii} about them, Siddhartha and his friend Govinda join them. As Siddhartha's father reluctantly gives him permission to go, he instructs, "If you find bliss in the forest, come back and teach it to me. If you find disillusionment, come back, and we shall again offer sacrifices to the gods together. Now go, kiss your mother..."^{ix} Practicing self-denial and meditation, Siddhartha over time is able to empty himself of desires and move beyond attachment to Self. Govinda and he selflessly serve others as they pass through various villages on their travels. Yet ultimately, Siddhartha comes to question the Samana way, just as he had questioned the Brahmin way. Neither would lead to full enlightenment, to Nirvana, Siddhartha feels.^x

Then, after about three years as a Samana, Siddhartha and Govinda have the opportunity to

meet the Buddha, Gotama. He practices a Middle Way between high living and mortification of the flesh.^{xi} With a half smile always on his lips, the Buddha reflects continuous quiet, unfading light, and invulnerable peace.^{xii} He effectively teaches how to overcome suffering in the world through an Eightfold Path. The Buddha radiates truth, and Govinda commits to becoming a disciple of his. However, Siddhartha, while calling the Buddha's teaching flawless, feels he must continue his search for enlightenment in his own way, as the Buddha himself did.^{xiii}

Strangely, this next leads to Siddhartha's becoming a wealthy business man deeply involved in a sexual relationship with the courtesan Kamala. At first he seems to do this utterly without ego-attachment. He treats all, rich and poor equally. He sees business as a game which he enjoys playing, but not as something either about which to worry, nor through which to take advantage of other people. In his relationship with Kamala he learns the art of lovemaking very well, for which he generously compensates her.^{xiv}

But then, after long living the life of the world without belonging to it,^{xv} in his forties Siddhartha succumbs to what the narrator calls "the soul sickness of the rich."^{xvi} Acquisitiveness and an accompanying weariness overcome Siddhartha: "Property, possessions and riches...trapped him. They were no longer a game and a toy; they had become a chain and a burden."^{xvii} Interpersonally he loses his kindheartedness and patience, he becomes hard and mean in business transactions, and he comes to feel he no longer needs Kamala, who's beginning to show signs of aging. So he takes off, without saying goodbye to anyone.^{xviii}

At this point, Siddhartha has fallen low enough, and is depressed enough, that he contemplates suicide by drowning himself in a river. He's saved at the last minute, though, by a deep memory of the ancient beginning and ending of all Brahmin prayers, the word "Om" or God.^{xix} The river then takes on another meaning for him, and he ends up as an apprentice to a ferryman, taking travelers back and forth whenever they need to cross the water. In listening carefully to the river, and to the other ferryman who turns out to be an enlightened being -- a Buddha -- himself, Siddhartha comes to full enlightenment by the end of the book, while continuing to serve others as their ferryman.^{xx}

In Siddhartha's Buddhist world, there's a strong sense of universal compassion. In the river he is able to see, and then somehow to serve, all of humanity -- the merry and the weeping, the childish and the grown up. "They all belonged to each other: the lament of those who yearn, the laughter of the wise, the cry of indignation, and the groan of the dying."^{xxi} On a spiritual level, then, we are told that "When he did not bind his soul to any one particular voice and absorb it in his Self, but heard them all, the whole, the unity; then the great song of a thousand voices consisted of one word: Om--perfection."^{xxii}

Wait a minute now... Isn't this generalized compassion devoid of individualized love? Isn't Siddhartha in effect the priest or the Levite on the road to Jericho, passing by the individual sufferer, or forsaking the individual relationship, with his ear tuned only to the holy unity, the great song of a thousand voices coalescing in the word "Om?" What can it mean to be enlightened, if in the process you forsake your mother and your father -- clearly much more your "neighbor" than a stranger bleeding on the side of the road to Jericho -- (your mother and your father) who asked you to come back home at some point and teach them the bliss you found in the forest? What can it mean to be enlightened, if in the process you abandon your best friend, Govinda, who weeps as you leave him as a disciple of the Buddha, while you go off to find your own unique and precious way? What can it mean to be enlightened, if you leave one with whom

you've had an intimate, sexual relationship for many years, merely because you've become disillusioned in your work and she's starting to show some lines and wrinkles of aging? How often do each of us pursue great causes on the horizon, while missing opportunities to express our love for, or even deserting, those close at hand who need our attention and loving concern?

It turns out that, unknown to him, Siddhartha had left Kamala pregnant with their child, a son, when he walked out on her without a word. Years after Siddhartha has become a ferryman, Kamala and her eleven-year-old son come to cross the river, but just as she gets near his ferry, she's fatally bitten by a snake. She dies on Siddhartha's bed after he has identified and acknowledged their child.^{xxiii}

Then, for the first time, Siddhartha truly learns something about love. He has his Samaritan opportunity. Over a period of months with his son, Siddhartha tries to make a good home for him in the ferryman's hut and to help his son overcome his grief at his mother's loss. Soon Siddhartha loses his heart completely; he utterly forgets himself in his devotion to his son. But the boy cannot make the transition to this radically different lifestyle. He turns against his father, runs away and never returns. Siddhartha is wounded so deeply that he's not sure he can ever recover.^{xxiv} He remembers now how he'd also left his own father and never returned; he personally feels the pain and suffering of his long-deceased father, who'd died alone without ever having seen his son again.^{xxv}

Luckily, as an old man, Siddhartha is reunited with his childhood friend, Govinda. They have a fascinating discussion about love, with Govinda reminding Siddhartha that the Buddha forbade his disciples to experience love: "He preached benevolence, forbearance, sympathy, patience -- but not love."^{xxvi} Love is a matter of worldly illusion, claims Govinda. It's deeply caught up in ego-attachment, perhaps even narcissism. It imprisons rather than freeing the human spirit.

Now, of course, the Buddhist virtues of benevolence and sympathy certainly would have been sufficient to lead the Samaritan to stop for the beaten man on the road to Jericho. Yet, Jesus described the commandment as loving your neighbor as yourself, not merely being benevolent or sympathetic. To me, the word "love" connotes a heartfelt, subjective, pathos-filled, emotional response, well beyond the cool, distancing, more objective, rational or almost intellectual values of benevolence and sympathy. Siddhartha experienced those rich, warm feelings of love finally with his son: utter devotion when together, and a wounded heart at the time of separation. Then he also felt deep grief, accompanied by pain and suffering, when he thought of his parents' love for him and how he had betrayed it by never coming home again.

Therefore, Siddhartha argues with Govinda -- and perhaps this is the Christian sensibility in Hermann Hesse arguing with the Buddhist sensibility. Hesse had been brought up in a Christian missionary household where it was assumed that he would study for the ministry. His own religious crisis as a young man led him in the direction of Eastern religion, but without ever completely abandoning a Christian worldview.^{xxvii} Siddhartha argues: "It seems to me, Govinda, that love is the most important thing in the world...I know that I am one with Gotama. How, indeed, could he not know love, he who has recognized all humanity's vanity and transitoriness, yet loves humanity so much that he has devoted a long life solely to help and teach people?"^{xxviii}

At the very end of the book, Siddhartha asks Govinda to kiss him on the forehead. As he does so, we're told that for Govinda "a certain contempt for his friends's words conflicted with a tremendous love...for him."^{xxix} Govinda then goes through a kind of mystical experience, as

Siddhartha's face somehow merges with and contains a continuous stream of thousands of other faces, which he appreciates in each of their specificity. Govinda emerges from the kiss with tears uncontrollably trickling down his face and an overwhelming feeling of great love for his friend, and through him [quote] "of everything that he had ever loved in his life, of everything that had ever been of value and holy in his life."^{xxx}

So in the end Siddhartha is not only capable of love himself, but of spreading it powerfully to others. This resonates for me with how Jesus preaches, teaches, and models an understanding of love that is well beyond mere benevolence and sympathy. Ultimately, Jesus' love literally involves a passion unto death. "Go and do likewise"^{xxxii} he counsels the lawyer seeking eternal life. The love commandments are forever linked, as today's gospel lesson makes clear. Loving our neighbor as ourself is a matter of loving the Lord our God with all our heart, and with all our soul, and with all our strength, and with all our mind. And then, as the reading from Deuteronomy^{xxxiii} promises, if we turn to God with all our heart and with all our soul, the Lord will again take delight in prospering us, just as God delighted in prospering our ancestors. So may it be. Let us love one another.

NOTES

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- i. Luke 10: 25-37.
 - ii. Matthew 22: 36-40; Mark 12: 28-33.
 - iii. Deuteronomy 6:5.
 - iv. Leviticus 19:18.
 - v. Hermann Hesse, Siddhartha (New York: New Directions, 1957).
 - vi. Ibid., p. 16; Huston Smith, The World's Religions (New York: HarperCollins, 1991), p. 83.
 - vii. Hesse, Siddhartha, p. 3.
 - viii. Ibid., p. 6.
 - ix. Ibid., p. 9.
 - x. Ibid., p. 14.
 - xi. Ibid., p. 17.
 - xii. Ibid., p. 20.
 - xiii. Ibid., pp. 23-29.
 - xiv. Ibid., pp. 43-59.
 - xv. Ibid., p. 60.
 - xvi. Ibid., p. 63.
 - xvii. Ibid.
 - xviii. Ibid., pp. 64-69.
 - xix. Ibid., pp. 70-72.
 - xx. Ibid., pp. 82-89, 106-111, 120-122.
 - xxi. Ibid., p. 110.

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- xxii. Ibid., p. 111.
- xxiii. Ibid., pp. 90-93.
- xxiv. Ibid., pp. 95-103.
- xxv. Ibid., p. 107.
- xxvi. Ibid., p. 119.
- xxvii. "About the Author" in Hermann Hesse, Siddhartha (New York: Bantam, 1971), p. 153.
- xxviii. Hesse, Siddhartha (New Directions), p. 119.
- xxix. Ibid., p. 121.
- xxx. Ibid., pp. 122.
- xxxi. Luke 10:37.
- xxxii. Deuteronomy 30: 9-14.