



Reckless Love, week three: Lavish Love: Rev. Cynthia Williams and Rev. Kermit Culver

In chapter three of Reckless Love, author Rev. Tom Berlin, states that God loves us lavishly and we need to open ourselves up to that love, our lives depend on it. Rev. Cynthia Williams, who serves as the district superintendent for the River Valley District of the Minnesota Conference, and Rev. Kermit Culver, who serves as the district superintendent for the Northwest District of the Dakotas Conference discuss what lavish love looks like.

Rev. Kermit Culver: It is a delight for me to be with you, Cynthia, and talk a little bit about Tom Berlin's third chapter, Lavish Love. We will talk about what those words mean. Cynthia what interested you in this chapter, what touched your heart?

Rev. Cynthia Williams: For me, it was like, this is my story. When you talk about Lavish Love, what I have come to know personally, is the difference it makes. Part of my story is that I grew up in the church. I grew up in this hell, fire and brimstone kind of church. My image of God was this God who was always angry and in a bad mood. Yes, you were in church, but you kept God kind of at a distance.

About 25 years ago, I had this pastor lead a study called Experiencing God. Experiencing God broke me open. One of the major tenants of the study was that God loves us and desires to be in this deeply personal relationship with us. I had been in church my whole life; how did I miss that? As a child, we sang the song, Jesus Loves Me. So I always knew Jesus loved you. I didn't know Jesus loved me.

I grew up in a somewhat dysfunctional family. In my family, there was a lot of shame, a lot of proving yourself. Love felt very conditional. You were only as good as the last best thing that you did. The whole idea that God could love me just as I am broke me open. It caught me so that I started leading the groups. God brought people into my life. I called it a synchronistic moment—a time when your inner readiness and your outward circumstances intersect.

There were these people who started coming into my life—Christians who loved me. I kept saying to myself, "Why are they so nice to me? Don't they know what a mess I am?" They loved me and stuck with me. I let them see my lumps and bumps, and they loved me.

In the book, Berlin talks about as we understand God's love; we don't stay in one place. Love pours out of us and flows. Love from others broke me open, to a point where my only response

was, “Lord, what shall I do? What can give back to you for all that you have done for me?” I was like; you can have my whole life.

God’s love has led me through corporate America, led me to ministry. It has led me into a world that I get to use all of who I am—lavish.

Rev. Kermit Culver: There have been people that have lavished love on you. In turn, that has broken you open so that you can lavish love on others. That is the genius of this chapter. One of the quotes I like in this chapter is: “What would the world be like if the people invested their creativity and energy in love?”

When we think we are living through in our church (United Methodist Church) right now, the people are investing their lives right now; it just seems illegitimate. A waste of time. If only we could focus our creativity and energy on love, in being and staying in love with God.

In this chapter, Berlin also talks about that lavish is both a verb and an adjective. Lavish as a verb: to bestow something in generous or extravagant qualities.

Rev. Cynthia Williams: The whole idea that lavish is a verb, describes a way to be. The first part of the book Berlin asks, what if we began each day with love? That question points to love as a verb. What if each day I would see a person through the eyes of love? What if I were to see the circumstances I am experiencing through the eyes of love? What if I saw my work through the eyes of love?

Sometimes you are exhausted. You don’t know if you have the energy to show up. What has changed for me is to say, “What if I go into this through the eyes of love?”

Rev. Kermit Culver: I love the idea of starting our day with love. How do we begin each day? How we get up makes a difference. I heard a while back someone say, some people get up in the morning and say, “Oh, good Lord morning,” with a sigh and moan. Some people get up in the morning, smile, and speak with enthusiasm, “Good Lord, it’s morning!” That is a difference in attitude.

A quote towards the end of chapter three, “The call to constant love means that we are going to need Jesus. Not just to set the standard for us, but to work in our lives. We are going to need to ask Jesus to help us see the world and its people as He sees them and love them as He loves them. We will need to cultivate practices that keep us connected to Christ so that we can follow the standard he sets in the Sermon on the Plain, along with the rest of His teaching the life that we witness in the Gospels. This dependence on Christ is exactly what He had in mind. Only when we learn to yield and ask him to exercise Lordship over our lives will we be able to love our neighbor as ourselves.” (p. 59)

When most think about how they are going to love better, they are going to think about how to get more people in their lives. Maybe people that are not easy to love, and I need to practice

loving them. Yes, you need to do that, but you do that as the bi-product of staying connected to God. We need to develop and deepen our dependency on God. Lavish love will flow naturally.

Rev. Cynthia William: It is about how we begin. The truth of the matter is that love is always around us. I have a friend who wakes up each morning and says, "Lord, show me who you want me to see." I think seeing with your eyes wide open is a spiritual discipline. The opportunities are always there before us.

Rev. Kermit Culver: I have to practice the disciplines of time alone with God, time in God's word, and praying. The more I do that, the easier it is to be lavish. The less I practice the disciplines, the harder it is to give and receive lavish love.