

The long-running and award-winning TV comedy “The Office” is about a horrible, dysfunctional boss, and a variety of horrible, dysfunctional coworkers. Vindictiveness, jealousies, manipulations, shallowness, self-absorption, backbiting, greed, sexism, racism, homophobia, arrogance, delusions of grandeur, insanity, insults, and nastiness of all kinds come up. It is the kind of humor that makes you cringe at the same time that you’re laughing. The main character is the boss, Michael Scott, who tries everything imaginable in his attempts to gain power and to make people love him. Except that he is so selfish and mean that in every attempt to get power he ends up falling on his face or shooting himself in the foot, and every time he tries to make someone love him he ends up horrifying them. You would think this would get overwhelmingly dark. The reason the story works is partly because of the cleverness and creativity of the scriptwriting, but it is mostly because the writers give us glimpses of how desperately lonely and afraid Michael Scott is, which evokes in us a sense of compassion.

He tries everything imaginable to try to make people love him, except recognizing the kindness, compassion, and love that good people around him are already giving him. He tries

everything imaginable to try to make people love him, except caring about them.

He tries everything imaginable to try to get power except recognizing the help that good people around him are already giving him. He tries everything imaginable to get power except treating anyone with basic dignity.

In previous sermons, I've quoted an observation: "The only two things human beings have ever fought about are these two questions: 'How much do you love me?' And 'Who's in charge?'" Over the years, I've kept looking to see if that is true, and it always has been. Now, I am wondering whether there is even more to that. It may be that these two questions are not only at the root of all our conflicts, they are also at the root of all our emotional pain. The thoughts that cause us the most emotional pain may come down to those two: "I don't have enough love." "I don't have enough control."

These are the issues that drive Michael Scott; these are the issues that drive the meanest and most miserable people we know in our own lives. And since every one of us has some painful spots in our own psyches, it is worth letting our guard down to ask ourselves whether the things that are painful in our lives may be coming from the thought, "I don't have enough love" or "I don't have enough control." The assumption that what we need to be

happy is to get more love, or to get more control, is so pervasive that we hardly ever question it. Like Michael Scott, we may spend our entire lives trying everything we can think of to try to make people love us more, to try to make the world submit to our control more.

And as we drive ourselves crazy, Jesus tells us something brilliant: Love. Jesus says: Love God. Love your neighbour.

We may think that getting love is what we need to be happy. But if you look around, you can see people who are loved plenty and are still miserable. We may think that being in charge is what we need to be happy. But if you look around, you can see people who are in charge of a lot and are still miserable.

What Jesus tells us is something radical. Instead of fretting over how much love you get, go ahead and give love generously. Instead of fretting over how much you control, serve others generously. The people who give love generously never run out of their source of joy. The people who serve others generously never run out of their source of joy.

It doesn't work if you offer your love in order to make sure someone owes you love. It doesn't work if you offer your service in order to make someone indebted to you. That's why the generosity of the love is at the heart of it.

It doesn't matter whether the person deserves your love or not. You can extend your compassion even to someone as awful as Michael Scott. Someone might point out that you can love Michael Scott much more easily than you can love someone in real life because Michael Scott is a fictional character. Fair enough. But the reason it's easier to love a fictional character is that you don't need anything from a fictional character.

The more you realize that you have all the love you need already, the less you need to get love from any particular person. That's what frees you to love generously.

And this is your lucky day, because you came to this church service today, and it is my job to remind you that the central tenet of your Christian faith is that God loves you infinitely. You already have boundless, eternal, mind-bogglingly splendid love flowing to you from throughout the universe.

Not only that, but God has given you human love too. The more we fret about the ways people don't seem to love us, the more we miss the huge varieties of ways people are loving us. Sometimes clumsily, sometimes in ways that are peculiar, sometimes not in the way we would do things, sometimes imperfectly, but loving us nevertheless.

I could say that the love we offer to others is from God. And that is true. And ultimately, the love we offer to others is God. As scripture tells us, God is love.

I could say that our love for God is from God. And that is true. And ultimately, our love for God is God. As scripture tells us, God is love.

Since we are familiar with negotiating relationships with other human beings, we often approach our relationship with God in similar ways. We may aim to please God or to stay on the Almighty's good side. We may want God to approve of our good behavior or to punish others who are not as well behaved as we are. We may try to keep a safe distance from God. And all the time, God is giving us love beyond our wildest dreams.

I have said that if I were asked to put all my sermons into ten words or less, it would be: "God loves you. Love God. Love your neighbour. Alleluia. Alleluia." And now I wonder whether those ten words could be compressed even further. Because I have the sense that God loving you, and you loving God, are actually the same thing in the end. That the more we allow ourselves to experience God's love for us, the more love flows through us to God.

Even if we ignore God's love, God still keeps loving. If we ignore the way God shows love by creating the magnificence of

the universe, spectacular beauty, intricate complexity, God still keeps loving. If we ignore the wisdom of the sages and prophets and visionaries who see more deeply than the rest of us, God still keeps loving. If we ignore that God will go to any lengths to express the limitless of his love for us, even to take on the frailty of human flesh, to suffer and die for us, God still keeps loving. Even if we ignore Christ's miraculous rising from the dead, God still keeps loving. And God still keeps offering us all those ways of experiencing the infinite and personal love of God. Because experiencing God's love is how we love. Loving is our joy.

If I had to sum up all my preaching into two words, it would be: Love. Alleluia.