



History: Loving a City

What if history could inspire students to love their city?

Robert taught high school history and wanted to encourage students to love their city and seek its well-being through their study of William Penn.

"Cities do not just appear on their own; they arise because someone dreamed them into being. The dreams of the founders reflected their beliefs about how people should live together and what conditions might produce a harmonious society. William Penn was such a founder. In 1681 he received a charter from King Charles II of England to start a colony (Pennsylvania) along the banks of the Delaware River. As a devout Quaker, Penn saw his colony as a 'holy experiment' in which people of differing religious backgrounds would be able to live next to each other without fighting each other. He located a capital for his colony along the river at a place where ships could dock near the shore and a town could be laid out on flat land. This became the city of Philadelphia, the 'city of brotherly love.'

"Penn decreed that the streets be built in a gridiron pattern, that the streets be wide enough to accommodate wagons, and that public parks be included at regular intervals to provide open spaces in which people could socialize. Open spaces would make the town a healthier place to live; a town that would be less likely to experience catastrophic fires, such as the one that devastated London in 1664. Beyond these physical advantages, Penn believed that his city would promote a more wholesome society in which social harmony would emerge from a well-organized and skillfully planned colony, that allowed each person to work out their faith as their conscience led them. Since force 'only creates hypocrites,' he believed eliminating religious coercion would produce a more godly society, and a freer one. Penn's faith inspired this attempt to build Philadelphia as a lovely place which in people lived in love.

"I showed the students images of London around 1700 and of Philadelphia during the 18th century, when it was the largest city in British North America. I had the students consider why Penn would have chosen this plan, how it might have reflected his belief in humans as God's image bearers, and whether the connections he made between belief and action were justified. I created a fictitious family with information about their life and had students imagine what it might have been like for them to live in Penn's Philadelphia. I ended by asking students to reflect on what they loved about their city, what it might

mean to 'love' a city in the face of its negative features, and how that love could demonstrated concretely."

What's going on here?

Robert saw the history of Pennsylvania as a chance to explore the difference between liking a city and loving it in the sense of seeking its well-being, and invited students to consider what it would mean to love a city and bring healing to a community. He also affirmed the role of faith and helped students to see faith at work in history.

He engaged students in focusing on particular people rather than just large trends (William Penn, and one city), encouraged students to connect on a personal level (empathizing with a family), and helped students to connect past events to present choices.

He reshaped his practice by creating and using a family narrative, and using a faith example.

What does this have to do with faith, hope, and love?

The Bible encourages people to love their city, to pray for it, and to work for its well-being. The New Testament encourages Christians to be good citizens, ready and willing to do good to others. It also encourages believers to remember what God's love looked like through past generations, to celebrate it, and to build on it in their own times. This is a new way of perceiving the past, framed by what God's vision is for the good of the city. It says that we can all play a part in bringing hope by loving our city.

What difference does it make?

Robert helped students to see that cities take shape for particular reasons and could be different. He showed how faith can play a role in that process, and helped students to realize the difference people can make to their communities.

Where do we go from here?

Students could think about the changes they would like to make in order to improve the lives of people who live near them and then make a photomontage of their city, illustrating the issues they have identified. They could also investigate what local organizations are working to make a difference in these areas.

Digging deeper

Within the Trinity there is a relationship of love between Father, Son, and Holy Spirit that puts love at the heart of the Godhead ([Luke 3:21-22](#)). Christianity connects God's love with the call for us to love God and to love others.

The words "God is love" have no real meaning unless God contains at least two persons. Love is something that one person has for another person. If God was a single person, then before the world was made, He was not love. *C. S. Lewis*

Love is central to Christianity as the defining character of God. It is not just a feeling that may come and go. It is a deep attachment to God and others, but it is also a choice and a commitment to a particular way of life. It includes faithfulness, mercy, compassion, and the long list of characteristics that St. Paul gave in [1 Corinthians 13:4-7](#). It therefore goes beyond liking something or responding to its attractiveness—it is the kind of love that reflects a commitment to the other's well-being. It is in this sense that the Bible tells us that God loves the world ([John 3:16](#)). Our love for the world around us can echo God's love.



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