

"Loving As Jesus Loved"

John 15:9-15

May 13, 2012

6th Sunday of Easter

It seems to be a very simple and innocuous word of Jesus for us today when He says, "Love one another." That's what poets and philosophers have said throughout the ages. Some would say that this is the essence of all religions. "All you need is love," the Beatles sang. Could it really be all that simple?

It all depends on how you define "love." Today's understanding of love is often quite shallow. Many people understand love as a feeling – a warm and pleasant feeling - but a feeling nevertheless. Modern day love is often expressed in words. We talk a lot about loving each other and let it go at that. When action *is* taken to express love, it is often done as much for the sake of the lover as it is for the beloved. In other words, we choose to love someone because of something they will do for us. We love those who are nice to us. We fall in love with those whose features and traits please us. Even if we show love to less desirable people, we do so in the hope of feeling good about ourselves for having done it. Our love ends up being a warm feeling which we express in words that makes us feel good.

Biblical love is much different. First of all, it is a commitment, not a feeling. Secondly it is expressed, first and foremost in action, not words. For example, loving one another and even loving God involves obedience. Our epistle reading today describes that: "By this we know that we love the children of God, when we love God and obey his commandments. For this is the love of God, that we keep his commandments." Jesus says in our text, "You are my friends if you do what I command you."

Thirdly, Biblical love is not self-directed. It is not done with the intent of making the one who loves feel good for having loved, but it is totally self-sacrificing for the sake and benefit of the beloved.

Jesus says, "Greater love has no one than this, that someone lays down his life for his friend." Love can cost you everything, even your own life.

When confronted with this definition of love, many people aren't interested. We live in a culture that is more interested in feeling than commitment. While we talk a good game, we often fail to back it up with action. And a lot of our energy is directed toward the service of self rather than others. I read a book on my trip called "The Narcissism Epidemic" which chronicles the wave of self-love in our society. People, even in the church, when they hear Jesus' words, wonder skeptically, "He can't be serious, can He?" or they simply ignore Jesus' words.

If you try to follow Jesus' words and love one another in the Biblical sense, you may find yourselves despairing over the fact that it's too hard to do. It's enjoyable to feel love and it's easy to talk about love, but it's much more difficult to actually love the way Jesus commands us to do it. Who can love God by obeying His commandments? Who can love so selflessly that he or she would lay down their lives for their friends? You may find yourself making excuses for yourself for your weak attempts at love. Or you may find yourself getting upset or angry with God for asking you to do what no one can do.

Yet there is someone who can and has done it. I didn't give you Jesus' full quote before. Jesus said, "Love one another", but there's more. He goes on to say "*as I have loved you.*" Jesus is the one who loves in this way. His love is not just a feeling. His love is not mere talk. Jesus loves in action. He doesn't ask you to do anything He hasn't done Himself

He is the one who kept the commandments of His Father. He says, "If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commandments and abide in his love." His obedience is not shaky or incomplete. He showed His love for His Father by perfectly obeying His Father's commandments.

Jesus' love was also perfectly selfless. His love moved Him to lay down His life. Jesus said that great love is laying down your life for your friends. Jesus does even better than that. Paul explains it in the book of Romans,

You see, at just the right time, when we were still powerless, Christ died for the ungodly. Very rarely will anyone die for a righteous man, though for a good man someone might possibly dare to die. But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us." (Romans 5:6-8)

Hear this clearly. Jesus didn't love those who loved Him. He loved you, who by your sins - your thoughts, words, and deeds - did not love Him. Jesus did not die for those who were already His friends - the good and righteous people of the world. Jesus demonstrated His love for you in that, while you were still a sinner - an enemy of God - He laid down His life for you.

It's natural, then, to look at Jesus' words, "Love one another as I have loved you" in the sense that Jesus is holding Himself up as an example for us to follow. But we don't need an example. An example of how to love won't help us because we are selfish, self-centered sinners. An example of how to love rightly will only serve to point our failure in loving and condemn us for loving wrongly.

We need to be rescued from our sinful selfishness. We need to be saved from our lovelessness. And THAT is why Jesus has loved you and me so much. He loved you in order to rescue you from your sin. He laid down His life to save you from the consequences of your sin - death which is separation from God now and separation from God forever. He rose from the dead - something we celebrate for 50 days because it is the ultimate expression of Jesus' love for us. His resurrection means victory over sin, victory over death, and victory over hell for His people.

We are here today, not because we chose to be here. Jesus says, "You did not chose me, but I chose you." In your baptism, Jesus chose each of you individually to be His own. By the forgiveness of sin won for you by His laying down of His life for enemies, He has made peace between God and you. He has made you His friends. Notice: it's not just that He is YOUR friend, but

you are HIS friend. He has appointed you that “you should go and bear fruit and that your fruit should abide.”

So, He says, “Love one another as I have loved you.” This is not optional. You are not free to ignore this command. Love for God shown through obedience of His commandments is the test of discipleship. You cannot be Jesus’ disciple and yet refuse to love each other. The friends of Jesus are those who habitually obey Him. Yet you cannot do this on your own. You will fail time and time again. So what’s the answer?

Jesus says, “Abide in my love. If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father’s commandments and abide in His love.” Your love has been thoroughly tainted by sin and cannot love as Jesus commands. Your only hope is to abide in His love – to be fully, completely, and constantly connected to His love as the source of your love.

Abide in His love which is, in fact, the Father’s perfect love come to us through Jesus. You are connected to His love when you are connected to Him. You are connected to Him when you are connected to His voice. Hear His Word and you will abide in His love.

You are connected to Him when you are connected to His flesh and blood. In receiving Holy Communion, you not only receive forgiveness of sins, but you are joined to His body and blood as it is joined to the bread and wine. You enjoy the most intimate abiding in His love that you can ever possibly experience when you kneel at that table.

You are connected to Him when you are connected to His body, the Church. The Church as a whole and its individual members are conduits of God’s love. You are joined to His people by faith and experience that most intimately at the Lord’s Table. You are joined to them and they are joined to you. His love flows from Him through them to you and through you to them.

Abiding in His love through regular and active participation in Word and Sacrament ministry is not a necessary religious duty or something we can choose to participate in on an occasional basis. It is the very lifeline of our souls. It is like those people who are on oxygen. They must be connected

to the oxygen tank by that tube constantly or they cannot get around and thrive. In the same way, we must abide in Jesus love – be connected to it – constantly or we cannot love God or one another.

But when we do abide in His love, then His love will flow through us and impact the lives of others. We will be able to love in deed and not just in word only. We will be able to love selflessly, rather than selfishly. Then we will see the love of Jesus active and alive in our families, in our community; in our ministry here and in our outreach to the world.

Today, we celebrate Mother's Day. Why is it so beloved and important to us? I think it is because, for many people, the love of a mother is the deepest and most selfless love that we ever experience. Our mothers gave us life. Our mothers nurtured and cared for us. Our mothers gave unselfishly of themselves for our good. It's no wonder we fondly remember our mother's love, celebrate that love every year, and reflect that love in our behavior to our mother.

Jesus love is even deeper and more selfless than our mother's love. His is the love which chose us, forgave us, befriended us, and saved us from sin, death, and hell by His perfect life of love and His selfless sacrifice of love on the cross. His is the love we contemplate, celebrate, and reflect in our faith and in our life. When we abide in His love, we will truly be loved and we will truly love with His love our friends, our family, our church family, acquaintances, strangers, and even enemies. Far from being a trite religious truism, "Love one another as I have loved you" will be both our comfort and our call, now and forever. Amen.