



WESTMINSTER
PRESBYTERIAN
CHURCH

“What Does Love Require?”

Scripture – John 15:9-17

Sermon preached by Dr. Gregory Knox Jones

Sunday, May 6, 2018

Words spoken in one situation can carry an entirely different meaning when spoken in another setting. “How are you? I hope you are doing well” can be a simple greeting to a friend you have not seen for a while. But say those same words to someone who is in the midst of a divorce or taking chemotherapy or has recently lost a loved one – How are you? I hope you are doing well – and those words carry much more weight. The context shifts the gravity of the words from a cheerful greeting to expressing a serious concern. “They are the exact same words, but they carry a different resonance and a different intensity.”¹

When the disciples were meandering down the road with Jesus and they were chatting about the weather or fishing prospects or simply kidding each other, the words of Jesus did not carry the same import as when he was teaching the Sermon on the Mount. When the scribes and Pharisees tried to embarrass Jesus with trick questions, what Jesus said in response carried much more weight than when they were casually conversing over a glass of wine at the end of the day.

Today’s lectionary reading picks up where last week’s reading left off. Mere hours before he is betrayed and handed over, Jesus sits at the table for his final meal with his closest companions. As the Gospel of John tells it, Jesus gives a lengthy speech – what scholars have dubbed the “Farewell Discourse.” Jesus knows the sand in the hour glass has nearly emptied so he uses the occasion to underscore the indispensable elements of his message. The disciples understand this is not casual table talk. These are words to commit to memory.

Not surprisingly, at this crucial moment, Jesus trumpets the importance of love. He says, “This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you.” Of course, his words were intended not only for his band of brothers – the 12 who were closest to him – they are intended for all people in all ages who call themselves Christian.

If asked to characterize the Christian faith with one word, it would have to be *love*. God loves us and we are commanded to love God by loving others. This comes easier for some than others.

It is a struggle to truly love another if you have not experienced love yourself. If you did not have a parent who embraced you, who stood up for you, who believed in you, who supported you and who sacrificed for you, it may be difficult for you to accept the fact that God loves you. If there is something buried deep inside that whispers, “You are not worthy; you are undeserving,” THAT IS A LIE! It may have been planted there by a parent who did not know how to love – someone who had been scarred herself. The belief that you are unworthy may have been

imbedded in your subconscious inadvertently by a father who believed he was motivating you by constant criticism.

If that describes your situation, you must come to terms with the fact that you were harmed by a human being who had his/her own weaknesses and wounds. Then you must ask yourself if it makes sense to allow an imperfect person to cripple you for the rest of your life.

Or you may imagine that God does not love you because of something wrong or cruel you have done. You must accept the fact that God loves you despite your flaws – no matter how outrageous. Never forget that God's second name is Grace and God's business is resurrecting new life out of the old. By denying that you are worthy of God's love, you are questioning God's capacity to forgive.

Once we embrace God's love for us and experience the healing power of love, we are better prepared for the mission Jesus gives us. He commands us to love others. But how do we understand this word *love*? I worry that it has become too soft, too cuddly, and too sentimental.

A colleague points out that in the 1960s when the nation was embroiled in angry disputes and sometimes violent protests over the Civil Rights Movement and the Vietnam War, the Beatles sang, "Love, love, love...All you need is love." Many enthusiastically embraced the message as the way to solve the vexing problems. Others scoffed and rejected love as a dreamy emotion that would distract people from the grueling efforts needed to rectify the poison of racism and the divisiveness created by the war.²

Neither perspective represents the radical nature of love Jesus taught in his parables and embodied in his interactions. For Jesus, love is always focused on the well-being of others. Love responds with what is best for the other person given the situation. Sometimes love requires warmth and kindness and understanding. Other times love demands the hard work of righting wrongs, speaking the truth, and setting limits.

Mention the word *love* and some people's minds automatically evoke ideas of sweetness and sentimentality. A mother picks up her toddler, embraces him, sings to him and kisses him. Love is idyllic and generates overwhelming joy. However, that little toddler grows up to be a rebellious teenager who puts himself and others at risk, and love demands not gentleness, but firmness.

A teenage son gets hooked on drugs and becomes desperate for money to support his habit. Dad is pretty sure that a twenty dollar bill is missing from his wallet, but does not say anything. One night the son comes home high and his parents have a loud and tearful confrontation. The next day, they find a counselor, but the son refuses to go. They let it slide. He ends up in jail, they bail him out. The parents start going to counseling and finally realize that their love for their son requires not more leeway, but limits. They force him to get help for his addiction.

Sometimes love is soft, sometimes love is tough. Love seeks the well-being of the other.

In our passage, Jesus makes it clear that love is demanding. He says, "This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends."

Do you ever watch nature shows? I love it when a helicopter buzzes low over the ocean and their cameras catch dolphins racing through pristine waters and launching themselves skyward for the sheer glory of it. Of course, nature is not always so enchanting. We can also witness the brutality of the food chain.

I remember watching a nature show where a camera caught two newborn fawns traipsing close behind their mother as she trekked through the forest. Suddenly the doe froze and raised her head high. Her eyes widened as she sensed danger. The fawns obediently halted and all three stood like statues.

Then there was another sound; a nearby animal. The camera swung in a new direction and there was a bear. One of the fawns took a couple of steps and as the leaves crackled beneath its hooves, the bear's head swung in their direction. The bear plodded toward them and the three deer stood motionless.

The mother deer knew her babies could not outrun a bear, so as it drew closer she did something bold. She pushed her fawns to the ground with her nose, as if to say, "Stay here." Then, she drew the bear's attention to herself, and led the bear in a new direction. She sacrificed her life in hopes of saving her children.

It was a breath-taking illustration in nature of the sacrificial love that Jesus talked about in today's passage: "No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends."

Fire fighters who rush into burning buildings and police officers who put themselves in harms way for strangers know this. And what parent does not know that loving your child requires numerous sacrifices? Parents sacrifice sleep, time, finances, and personal well-being for their children. Sacrificing for another is both the pain and the joy of loving others as God loves us. Many times when we make a sacrifice for another, it deepens our bond. We draw closer than we have been before and our love grows richer.

Jesus strikes a chord within us when he calls on us to love one another. We are created as children of God who are loved by our divine Parent and who find fulfillment when we love others.

Through the words he spoke, but more importantly, by the way he lived, Jesus exemplified love as much more than a feeling. It is action focused on the well-being of others.

A colleague tells of a university student who felt as if his faith was slipping away. "He made an appointment with the leading theologian on campus to talk about it. He walked into the wise old professor's office with a list of questions, including what books he should read to recover his faith. The professor surprised the student when he said, "Do not read any more books. Instead, find a homeless shelter or a soup kitchen that could use another hand. That is where you'll find other faithful people who serve and pray and live out God's love. That's where you will rediscover your faith. Not in books but by loving others as we have been loved."³

Is there anything holding you back from reaching out with Christ-like love?

NOTES

1. Thomas Troeger, "Homiletical Perspective," *Feasting on the Word: Year B, Volume 2*, (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008), p. 497.
2. David S. Cunningham, "Theological Perspective," *Feasting on the Word: Year B, Volume 2*, (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008), p. 496.
3. Agnes Norfleet, "Practicing Resurrection: Rooted and Grounded in Love, May 3, 2015.