

“Just As I Have Loved You”
Reverend Bill Gause
Overbrook Presbyterian Church
6th Sunday of Easter
May 26, 2019

First Scripture Reading: Deuteronomy 10:12-22 (The Message)

¹²⁻¹³So now Israel, what do you think God expects from you? Just this: Live in his presence in holy reverence, follow the road he sets out for you, love him, serve God, your God, with everything you have in you, obey the commandments and regulations of God that I’m commanding you today—live a good life.

¹⁴⁻¹⁸Look around you: Everything you see is God’s—the heavens above and beyond, the Earth, and everything on it. But it was your ancestors who God fell in love with; he picked their children—that’s *you!*—out of all the other peoples. That’s where we are right now. So cut away the thick calluses from your heart and stop being so willfully hardheaded. God, your God, is the God of all gods, he’s the Master of all masters, a God immense and powerful and awesome. He doesn’t play favorites, takes no bribes, makes sure orphans and widows are treated fairly, takes loving care of foreigners by seeing that they get food and clothing.

¹⁹⁻²¹You must treat foreigners with the same loving care— remember, you were once foreigners in Egypt. Reverently respect God, your God, serve him, hold tight to him, back up your promises with the authority of his name. He’s your praise! He’s your God! He did all these tremendous, these staggering things that you saw with your own eyes.

²²When your ancestors entered Egypt, they numbered a mere seventy souls. And now look at you—you look more like the stars in the night skies in number. And your God did it.

Second Scripture Reading: John 13:34-35

³⁴I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another.

³⁵By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.”



Sermon: “Just As I Have Loved You”

Our reading from John comes at the last supper, after Jesus has washed the disciples’ feet, and after Judas has left to go do his thing. Knowing what will happen to him shortly, Jesus begins to teach his disciples one last time. It is sort of his last words to the disciples. And one of the first things he tells them is to love one another as he has loved them.

It is beautiful and poetic. It calls to mind the central theme of Jesus’ life and ministry. Earlier in the gospels, Jesus says that the greatest law is to love God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength, and your neighbor as yourself.¹ That love is at the heart of everything Jesus says and does. If you wanted to condense Jesus’ life and ministry onto a bumper sticker, you would be hard-pressed to do better than “Love one another.”

But that word “Love” is funny because it doesn’t always mean the same thing everytime we use it. There was an old children’s Saturday morning TV show called *Pee Wee’s Playhouse*. Some of y’all probably remember it. There’s an episode where Pee Wee says with great enthusiasm “I love fruit salad.” And one of his friends says, “Well then why don’t you marry it?” - and so, he does. They have a whole ceremony where Pee Wee marries a bowl of fruit salad.² (For those who never watched the show, this was pretty typical of the weird level of humor.)

We tend to think of love as an expression of emotion. It’s how you feel about your children and your spouse. It’s what the Beatles sang about and what Elizabeth Barrett Browning wrote poems about. It’s the central theme of everything you’ve ever watched on the Hallmark Channel. So, when Jesus teaches that we are to love others, we’re usually okay with that until we realize he also meant strangers and people we don’t like. And then Jesus comes right out and says “Love your enemies”³ and most of us just pretend we didn’t hear that part.

As we’ve said, “Love” is a complex word that covers a multitude of concepts and ideas.

How complex? Well, let me show you by telling you five things about me:

- I love fried chicken.
- I love books and movies.
- I love my children.
- I love my wife.
- I love God.

Five simple sentences, using the same structure and the same verb, and they are all true, but the word “love” has a different meaning in each of them.

So, we have to remember that when Jesus talks about love, he isn't talking about what we like or to whom we feel affectionate. Jesus is talking about how we relate to other people; both those we know and those we don't. Because the love Jesus demands is less about how we feel than it is about what we do.

To really understand what love is, we always look to 1st Corinthians 13 where Paul breaks it down for us:

⁴Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant ⁵or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; ⁶it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth. ⁷It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. ⁸Love never ends.

You've heard that before, right? If you've worshipped with me over the last six years, you've heard it a lot. But contrary to the way that passage is often used today, Paul was not writing a Valentine's Day card and he wasn't writing a romance novel, either. He was actually chastising the Corinthian church for neglecting to love one another. All the things he says "love is", are the exact opposite of the things the Corinthians were doing. He had to tell them that love is patient and kind, because they were being impatient and unkind to each other. He had to tell them that love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude, because they were busy doing *all* those things. So basically, 1st century Corinth was the Washington, D.C. of its day.

In sharing his final wisdom with his disciples, Jesus gives them what he calls a "New Commandment"; that they love one another. Now to the sharp-eyed reader, this is hardly a new commandment. As far back as the Old Testament Book of Leviticus, God has charged the people to "love your neighbor as yourself"⁴ so love is not a new commandment. But Jesus doesn't just teach them to love one another, he adds a qualifier that makes this a bit more challenging. Because we are not to love one another as we see fit, as time allows, until we get tired, unless we have a better offer or if they love us first. We are to love one another, *as Jesus first loved us*. "Just as I loved you, you should love one another."

So how does Jesus love? I'm glad you asked.

Jesus loves without fear.

Remember the woman accused of adultery?⁵ A crowd has gathered to stone her, but Jesus enters the ring and stands between the crowd and the accused woman. How much courage did it take to put himself at risk for a woman he did not know? And how much courage to come out against the standards and norms of the community? Don't forget that at that time the penalty for adultery was death. And that wasn't something dreamed-up by some evil despot. It is nestled right down into the very laws of the Old Testament. Leviticus 20:10 says that if you're caught in the act of adultery, you are to be put to death. You can look it up.⁶

But Jesus stepped into that situation and said, "Let he who is without sin cast the first stone."

It was that same courage that led him to stand-up to the Jewish and Roman authorities rather than plead for leniency or promise to stop preaching the gospel and "causing trouble," or even escape to preserve his own life. But he did not, because Jesus loves without fear.

Jesus' love was compassionate.

We can see that in his encounter with the woman accused of adultery. But we also see it in the way he healed the sick and infirm. And in the way he made time for people that had been forgotten and pushed to the margins.

When a powerful public official named Jairus calls for Jesus to come to his house and heal his daughter, Jesus goes. But on the way a woman who has been afflicted with a flow of blood for 12 years reaches out to him and touches his cloak in the hopes that she will be cured. Jesus is in a hurry to reach the home of a man who is important in that same community. How do we know he is important? Because the author remembers his office and his name.

How do we know this woman was unimportant? Because she was a woman. Because we are never even told her name. Because she was afflicted with a menstrual flow, which in that time made a woman unclean and therefore untouchable until that time was ended, and hers had persisted for 12 years.

But Jesus is overwhelmed by compassion. He turns aside from his errand to help a powerful person and stops to help one the community considers worthless.⁷

Jesus invites children to come to him. Jesus calls on his disciples to feed the crowds that have gathered to hear him. Jesus heals the blind and the crippled and those who believed themselves to be possessed by demons and those with diseases that had no cures. Jesus helped those who had nowhere else to turn without asking them where they came from or how they got that way, without accepting payment, and (here's the real kicker) without demanding a profession of faith in him beforehand. He served without condition or demand, because Jesus' love was compassionate.

Jesus' love had a short memory.

Remember that Peter denies Jesus three times while Jesus is on trial for his life.⁸ At the moment when Jesus most needed a friend, they all fled and abandoned him.⁹ Yet just three days later, after the resurrection, there is Jesus with Peter and the other disciples - loving them, teaching them, encouraging them.¹⁰

You will probably also remember the story Jesus tells about the Prodigal Son and his good father.¹¹ It is the story of a father's love that overcomes the hateful, dismissive treatment of his own son. We remember that the prodigal demands his share of what he is destined to receive as an inheritance when his father eventually dies. But because he demands it while his father is still very much alive, he is treating his father as if he were already dead.

One might find this at least marginally acceptable were he planning to use the inheritance to support a family or pay-off the debts of a poor widow. But no, he blows his fortune on what Luke calls "dissolute living;" which is to say a life of reckless abandon. If he could drink it, snort it, or have immoral relations with it, he did. When he slinks home, he has nothing to show for what his father has given him except the scars of a hard life, but the father does not care. He *runs* out to meet him.

And the running is an important detail in Jesus' story because men of the time did not normally run. They wore robes with no undergarments. Ever try to run in a long dress or a robe? You've got to hike it up. Men didn't run because to do so they would have to hike up their robes and show their fannies to the world. If the father was running, it's because he didn't care who saw him.

Whatever the son did or neglected to do; whatever his attitude toward his father had been; whatever depths of depravity to which he had sunk during his time in the city were but distant memories to the father. His memory was short because his love and desire for his son's well-being was long. Jesus tells that story because it illustrates how Jesus loves us, too. Jesus' love has a short memory.

And that's because Jesus' love forgives.

Most of us probably remember the little song about Zacchaeus, the wee little man who climbed a sycamore tree to see Jesus as he passed by. According to the gospel writer Luke, Zacchaeus was "a chief tax collector and was rich."

That means he got rich by collecting taxes. Tax Collectors of the time were known to skim off the top whatever they could. In fact, that was the chief perk of being a tax collector. The Roman government didn't pay you; you collected your salary while you collected taxes. If Rome got its share, they didn't really care how much more you took from the population.

But Jesus came to save the sick and to find the lost. And when Zacchaeus repents of his past sins and commits to repaying what he has defrauded, *with interest*, Jesus says to him "Today salvation has come to this house."¹²

It made a lot of people who wanted to see Zacchaeus punished, very angry. But, Jesus didn't care about that because Jesus' love forgives.

Jesus loves with a servant's heart.

"Whoever wishes to be great among you, must be your servant,"¹³ That's what Jesus told the disciples. And at the last supper when, as John tells us, Jesus took a basin of water, wrapped a towel around his waist, and began to wash the disciples' feet, he showed them what he meant.¹⁴ It was an act of service meant to demonstrate to his followers that their lives were meant to be lives not of privilege, but of service. And then after his resurrection, when he met the disciples on the beach, he asked Peter three times "Do you love me more than these?" Three times Peter answered "yes," and each time, Jesus replied "Feed my sheep." In that moment he again drew the connection between love and service. To love Jesus is to serve others.¹⁵

When Jesus served, it was an act of love. When he fed the hungry, it was an act of love. When he healed the sick, it was an act of love. To love Jesus is to be a servant to the world. Jesus loved with a servant's heart.

And finally, Jesus' love was sacrificial.

He gave of himself in every way. As Matthew tells us, "he gave his life as a ransom for many."¹⁶ Jesus embodied the fullness of God. As Paul writes about Jesus in his letter to the Philippians that:

⁶...he was in the form of God, [yet he] did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, [He] emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, ⁸he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death— even death on a cross.¹⁷

Presidents travel in long, armored motorcades and live in a mansion. The Pope travels in a bullet-proof “Pope-Mobile” and lives in a walled city. The rich and powerful and famous can exist above the muck and mire of daily life. Yet, in Jesus, God gave up the privileges of power, the trappings of divinity and the security of power and dwelled here among us - as one of us, to love us and show us how to live into the promises and blessings of God’s Kingdom.

Jesus was famous in his day. He could have used his power and popularity for his own benefit. But everything he did was in service to God. He sacrificed a life of ease for the life of an itinerant preacher. And in humble servitude, he stood for the Kingdom of God, and against the powers and principalities of this world - even though it cost him his life.

Jesus died for us. If you grew up in the church, then one of the first verses of the Bible that you ever learned was John 3:16: *“For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.”* So great is the love of God, most completely expressed in the life of Jesus, that he was willing to die for us, to save us from ourselves, to cleanse us from sin, to demonstrate God’s power that is greater than anything this world can muster. Jesus’ love is sacrificial.

“Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another.” Twelve words, but they are loaded with meaning, and potential, and challenge. They are our call to discipleship; the definition of how we should interact with the world around us. They define for us what God intends the world to be and what we are to strive for.

And they are nearly impossible to live-up to completely, at least alone. Which is why we have each other and which is why God’s Holy Spirit moves among us. We try our best to love as Christ loved, and sometimes we will fail, but then we try again.

And we never forget that those 12 words commanding us to love, begin with the good news that Jesus first loved us.

To God be all glory, honor, power, and dominion, in this world, and in the world that is to come. Amen.

End Notes

¹ Mark 12:28-31, NRSV (Matthew 22:35-40, Luke 10:25-28)

² McGrath, George, and Paul Reubens. “Pajama Party.” *Pee Wee’s Playhouse*, season 2, episode 10, CBS, 21 Nov. 1987.

³ Matthew 5:43-44, NRSV (Luke 6:27-28)

⁴ Leviticus 19:18, NRSV

⁵ John 7:53-8:11, NRSV

⁶ Leviticus 20:10, NRSV

⁷ Mark 5:21-43, NRSV (Luke 8:40-56, Matthew 9:18-26)

⁸ Luke 22:54-62, NRSV

⁹ Matthew 26:56, NRSV

¹⁰ John 20:19-21:19, NRSV

¹¹ Luke 15:11-32, NRSV

¹² Luke 19:1-10, NRSV

¹³ Matthew 20:26, NRSV

¹⁴ John 13:1-17, NRSV

¹⁵ John 21:15-17, NRSV

¹⁶ Matthew 20:28, NRSV

¹⁷ Philippians 2:6-8, NRSV