

Preaching for Lutheran Church of the Good Shepherd

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Date: May 9, 2021 Year B, 6th Sunday in Easter

Text: John 15:9-17

Title: What is this Thing Called Love?

Focus: In this passage from the Farewell Discourse, Jesus redefines love as commandment-keeping, self-giving, self-sacrifice, and even laying down one's life.

Gospel Reading: John 15:9-17

[Jesus said,] ⁹As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love. ¹⁰If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commandments and abide in his love. ¹¹I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete. ¹²"This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. ¹³No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends. ¹⁴You are my friends if you do what I command you. ¹⁵I do not call you servants any longer, because the servant does not know what the master is doing; but I have called you friends, because I have made known to you everything that I have heard from my Father. ¹⁶You did not choose me but I chose you. And I appointed you to go and bear fruit, fruit that will last, so that the Father will give you whatever you ask him in my name. ¹⁷I am giving you these commands so that you may love one another.

That Song about Love

During my college and post-college years, I spent 4 summers leading summer camps for the Presbyterian synod in Southern California. Camp is on my mind as summer approaches and as we take the Second Mile offering this month for Mt. Cross. I was a Lead Counselor and then Camp Director over the course of 4 years and those experiences were formative for me in the friendships I formed and in confirming for me my sense of God's call to ordained ministry and in developing my gifts for that call.

I remember one evening at campfire, a boy struggled to remember the name of a song that he wanted to make sure that we sang. He couldn't remember the name. He couldn't sing a line of it. What he finally sputtered out was

- **"You know, the one about love."**

"Oh, sure; that narrows it down! (We're going to need a little more than that to go on.)"

Thinking about and talking about love can be complicated, don't you think? Part of that complication results from the wide variety of ways we speak of love. We make use of all kinds of understandings or definitions of love. There are all kinds of symbols or representations of love in our culture. As I officiated at a wedding service not too long

ago, I talked with the couple and guests about some of the ways we think about love between a couple:

- There is the idea of love at first sight.
- There is recognition of how love grows over time.
- There are websites and phone apps for those seeking love.
- There are songs about love, Poems about love, Movies about love, books about love, and advice columns about love.
- We talk about “falling in love” and “being in love.”

And all those understandings of love are primarily about romantic love. We also speak of love in other ways:

- “I love ketchup on my French fries.”
- “I love the way that shirt looks on you!”
- “Love. It’s what makes a Subaru, a Subaru.”
- “My dog loves those treats.”
- “Oh, for the love of God!”
- “We loved that new Netflix series.”
- “I love you to the moon and back.”

Because we talk about love in so many different ways, it can be hard to know what we mean. I wouldn't say that any of those definitions are *wrong*; they are simply a reflection of how people use language and how language is fluid and ever-changing. But because of that fluidity and the varieties of meaning, I would say that we need to be clear about what we mean when we talk about love. And I would try to be clear about how Jesus describes or defines love here in the reading from John.

Jesus and the Farewell Discourse

If you had to pick a one-word theme to say what this passage from John is about, you'd have to say, “It’s about Love.”

This passage is a part of what is called the Farewell Discourse, which stretches from John chapters 14-17.

- *Farewell* because Jesus is getting ready to say goodbye to the disciples. The setting is after Jesus has had this meal with the disciples the night before his crucifixion. Jesus knows he’s going to die.
- *Discourse* because it’s Jesus speaking to the 11 disciples.

So, this section is Jesus’ final words to his disciples as he knows his death is approaching. This context adds weight to what Jesus is saying: What would you say if you knew that time and opportunity were short? Wouldn’t they be the most important things you could say?

Love is . . . (says our culture and says Jesus)

In English, we can use the word love to describe something as trivial as ketchup on a French fry and something as profound as a parent's care and concern for a child. So, let's look more closely at some of the ways we find ourselves using the word love in our culture and what Jesus is saying here.

We often think of or express love as a feeling of pleasure that may come and go. If we use the term "Falling in love," to describe a feeling of euphoria into which we have pleasantly slipped, then maybe that suggests we can just as easily fall out of love. Is that the way people think of it?

There's a poetic beauty in the way that Jesus describes love here in this passage. **Love is both a gift and a commandment.** Jesus said,

"As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love."

The love that Jesus displays for the world is a love which comes from God and is received as a gift of grace. It's a heavenly love but not a love that remains in heaven. As described in the first chapter of John,

"The Word became flesh and lived among us" (John 1:14).

So, we receive God's love as a gift, and yet we're also commanded to love. Jesus' use of the word "command" draws my memory back to chapter 13 of John. It's the scripture we know from Maundy Thursday, when Jesus gets up from the table before dinner, takes off his outer robe, and wraps a towel around himself and begins to wash their feet. . . .

¹²After he had washed their feet, had put on his robe, and had returned to the table, he said to them, "Do you know what I have done to you? ¹³You call me Teacher and Lord—and you are right, for that is what I am. ¹⁴So if I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. ¹⁵For I have set you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you. ¹⁷If you know these things, you are blessed if you do them.

(John 15:12 in today's passage is very similar to v. 15 in this passage from chapter 13: with its direct instruction: "*love one another as I have loved you.*")

Both in that passage (chapter 13) and here, Jesus says "command" or "do this." It's a reminder that love is more than a feeling and is demonstrated by what one *does*.

Jesus provided the most tangible example of that when he washed their feet and commanded them to do the same.

In our North American culture, “love” is often associated with things that are soft, safe, and warm. That’s a big contrast to what Jesus describes here. The kind of love Jesus commands comes, or at least potentially comes, at a cost: It is dangerous, fierce, and costly: “No one has greater love than this, to lay down one’s life for one’s friends” (v. 13). Love in John 15 is not chiefly shown by abstractions or feelings. It is backed up by what one does, and that can be costly.

One last feature or description to point out: I think Jesus’ characterization of love can sound hard or harsh to us. Maybe that word *command* or *commandment* makes us uncomfortable. Or if we don’t think twice about hearing about the costliness of love, then we’re not listening well. This isn’t warm and fuzzy, soft and safe at all. Jesus redefines love as commandment-keeping, self-giving, self-sacrifice, and even laying down one’s life. In another ironic description, like the combination of love being a gift and a commandment which I pointed out earlier, Jesus says that the intent of all this is that we may know joy. We may know joy by following commandments? That’s counter-intuitive, right? He says,

- “I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete” (verse 11).

Abiding in Jesus’ love means abiding in joy.

Love is. . .

There’s not a single definition of love in our culture, nor is there a single “biblical” definition of love. We have not said everything there is to say about love either from the perspective of contemporary use of the word or in scripture.

But this passage urges us to deepen our understanding of Jesus’ call to love and assures us of his own love for us as he invites us to “*abide, remain, stay* in my love.”

Jesus says to his followers, “And if I your Lord and teacher has washed your feet, you should do the same for each other. I have set an example for you. . .” (John 13:14-15).

- How will you demonstrate the love of God for the world?
- How will you follow the example that Jesus has set?

May we discover the joy of abiding in Jesus’ love.