

Loving Like Jesus Loves

John 15:9-17

Rev. Pen Peery

First Presbyterian Church, Charlotte, NC

May 10, 2015

As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; 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. I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete.

"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. You are my friends if you do what I command you. I 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.

You 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. I am giving you these commands so that you may love one another.

+++

The weekend that I graduated from high school my mom gave me a framed copy of a quote from Marian Wright Edelman that was addressed to her children. The quote now hangs on a wall next to my children's bedrooms. It reads:

I seek your forgiveness

for all the times when I talked when I should have listened; got angry

when I should have been patient;

acted when I should have waited;

feared when I should have delighted;

scolded when I should have encouraged;

criticized when I should have complemented;

said "No" when I should have said "Yes"

and "Yes" when I should have said "No."

I did not know a whole lot about parenting, or how to ask for help, so I mistakenly tried to mold you into my image of what I wanted you to be instead of discovering you and nourishing you as you emerged and grew.

Growing up, my mom had already shown me a lot about what it meant to love unconditionally. The lesson I learned from her as I stood on the threshold of adulthood was what role humility and vulnerability play in a loving relationship.

My mom grew up in a good home with two, loving parents. There is a lot about the way that mom loved us that was shaped by the way her parents demonstrated that love to her. But beyond family, there was another key factor in shaping the way my mom learned to love: Avondale Presbyterian Church, my mom's congregation as a child.

It was in church that mom learned what it meant to love sacrificially. Church was the place where she learned what it was to love up and down the generations: young children at Vacation Bible School, older adults in the Fellowship Hall, youth in the basement, business men (not many business women at that time...), elders, deacons. Church was where mom discovered what joining your voices in prayer or song, or your efforts in feeding the hungry or going on a mission trip can mean for deepening the love and connection to the community.

So in a very real way, I am indebted to the churches that formed my mother's faith for shaping the quality of the love that she shared with me.

+ + +

"This is my commandment," Jesus said, "that you love one another as I have loved you."

There are a lot of commandments in the Bible. Some of them seem easier to follow than others. During his ministry, Jesus built from the Old Testament to offer some of his own:

Love the Lord your God with all your heart and soul and mind, and love your neighbor as yourself.

Forgive one another – not seven times, but seventy times seven times.

Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.

These are all pretty demanding statements. But in this passage from John's gospel, Jesus raises the standard: "love one another as I have loved you."

Think about that for a moment.

Loving someone through betrayal.

Loving someone through denial.

Loving people who just don't get it.

Loving those who persist in sin.

Loving the unlovable.

Loving someone to the point of laying down your own life.

That is a lot bigger ask than loving your neighbor as yourself. And it is what Jesus calls the church to do.

This is a passage of scripture that offers a vision for what relationships are like in the church – relationships among people whom Jesus calls his friends.

We all have different kinds of friends.

We have work friends – who see the part of ourselves that we choose to share in public – often focused on making a good impression and demonstrating our competence and value.

We have old friends – who can share in the stories of our past, who know lots of the same people, and who were shaped by the same culture as us (for better or for worse).

We have Facebook friends – who look in on us from time to time – mainly at our high points – to stay connected.

We have family friends – who become our friends by proxy of the one we marry or into whose house we are born or adopted.

And then there are church friends – the people we see in the pews on Sunday morning; at fellowship events; in Bible studies; on the Habitat job site; at Sunday night youth fellowship; in line at the carpool; at our parent’s funeral; our kid’s weddings; during the times when life brims with fullness and joy; and during those seasons when the world feels like it is falling apart.

Love one another as I have loved you, Jesus said.
That’s what it means to be church.

I hope you have had an experience of the kind of love that Jesus is talking about here.

Because when you are a part of the church – it means so much more than simply belonging to an organization. It is about much more than what the church can offer you and your family.

Being a part of the church means that you belong to the people who comprise this congregation, and they belong to you. Being a part of the church means that we share in celebration and in grief; in hope and in anxious moments; in our strengths and in our weaknesses; in our faith and in our questions.

I’ve seen what it means to be church here.

I remember a funeral we had here almost two years ago. The funeral was for a woman who lived a long, good life – and yet a life where she carried deep pain about her children who had been difficult and who had become estranged. As they often are, the funeral became the event that dredged up old hurts. The adult children were still fighting the same fight of their youth – even in the wake of their mother’s death, they could not think or act beyond their own self-interest. It made for an

interesting worship service. Bizarre, actually. Yet in the midst of all of this, there, sitting on the front of the sanctuary were two pews filled with members of the Presbyterian Women. These were the people who knew what disappointment their friend had carried. They were the people who had prayed with her for patience, and strength, and good outcomes. They were the ones who had helped her focus on the richness of life that existed above the places of despair. They were there – steady, respectful, supportive – like family.

Love one another as I have loved you...

Earlier this week I attended an event where I again heard the story of Judge James McMillan. Judge McMillan was a member of First Presbyterian Church. He was an Elder. He sang in the choir. He was also a federal judge who, in 1969 ruled that the Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools were not sufficiently integrated and required that the school district have mandatory busing that would reflect the diversity of our county in our schools. This decision, of course, angered many people, set off protests, and eventually wound up in the United States Supreme Court.

Soon after this ruling, Judge McMillan began to receive threats against his home and his family. When the threats continued, he began to fear for his safety. It was at this point that Dr. Lee Stoffel, a former pastor at First Presbyterian, and other leaders in the congregation took Judge McMillan and his family into their homes – rotating places where they would sleep – until the threats against him subsided.

Because, you see, that is what you do when one of your brothers in Christ exercises his faith in public. You support him; you protect him; you share in the risk of such a proclamation.

Love one another as I have loved you...

The love that sustains the relationships that Christ establishes as members of his church is expressed in casseroles that show up the birth of a baby or a death of a parent.

It is seen in a handwritten note after the news of a cancer diagnosis or when your work or school accomplishments get picked up by the paper.

I see us being the church that Jesus hoped for when I witness people of different tax brackets sitting down at Wednesday lunch or Wednesday supper to share life and a meal with one another.

I witness the church when people who read the Bible differently teach it together for 32 weeks out of the year.

I see it when one member asks another how many days they have until they get their green chip.

I see it in the unabashed joy of children singing – loudly, if not on key – about the whole world being in God’s hands...while parents and grandparents smile goofy smiles and take pictures with their iPhones.

I have experienced it in emails and notes and conversations that are both supportive and challenging; by people who take their relationship and friendship with me seriously enough to share their affirmations and their concerns.

It is church! This is what it looks like to model the love the Christ has for us.

To bring our whole selves before one another and God.

To admit that we are broken and that we cannot be alone.

To bind ourselves together with imperfect people – not so that we might find perfection, but so that we might find one another...and in finding one another, discover what it is that Jesus so loves.

And maybe you can find this kind of relationship and love and friendship somewhere else. Maybe there are other groups or organizations who can provide this kind of community and support – perhaps even meaning. But I doubt it.

Because while the church is not perfect – it is still God’s chosen instrument to nurture the love that we see in the heart of Christ.

And what makes the church holy is that the love that defines us does not exist for its own sake – but for the sake of the world.