9/2-3/17 Rev Amy Haines

1 Jn 4:7-16 Connecting with Our Christ Won’t You Be My Neighbor? Series

This weekend we are midway through our sermon series, “Won’t You Be My Neighbor?”

We began two weeks ago with the call to first connect to the neighbors within this congregation. For if we cannot love another we know well within the body of Christ, the church, how are we to witness to God’s love outside these walls to our surrounding community?

Last weekend Vicki Robinson reminded us that we are all beloved children of God, and are called to welcome all God’s children, beginning with the kids we see on a Sunday morning, and moving out to include the 350 children and families that enter our doors each week through Bright Beginnings Christian Preschool.

Like ripples across a still pond, we started close to home, then have moved out to others who consider this their school, and now we begin to ripple out even further as we begin to challenge ourselves to reach out to the neighbors within our community.

Yet in order to reach out and love our neighbor, we first must pause today and consider how we are to love our God. So today we will look at how we are connecting with our Christ, and how that connection then calls us out into our neighborhoods and finally, the world. Whether we are connecting to family, friend, fellow member in the body of Christ, God or neighbor, our connections are to be grounded in love.

Love.

To misquote Inigo Montoya from the movie *The Princess Bride*:

“You keep using that word. I do not think it means what you think it means.”

-imdb.com quotes from *The Princess Bride* 1987

Look around at our culture.

Consider how many times we use the word *love* in the course of a day.

We love the sunrise. We love the Buckeyes.

We love our family. We love our God.

We love a favorite restaurant. We love a certain brand of shoes.

Not all of those types of love are the same.

Children ages 4-8 were once asked to define love. Here are some of their definitions.

. Love is that first feeling you feel before all the bad stuff gets in the way.

. Love is when you tell a guy you like his shirt, then he wears it every day. – Noelle, age 7

. Love is like a little old woman and a little old man who are still friends

even after they know each other so well. – Tommy, age 6

. Love is what makes you smile when you’re tired. – Terri, age 4

. Love is when mommy sees daddy smelly and sweaty

and still says he is handsomer than [Brad Pitt] – Chris, age 7

. Love is when your puppy licks your face even after you left him alone all day.

– Mary Ann, age 4

. Love is when mommy gives daddy the best piece of chicken. – Elaine, age 5

. I know my older sister loves me because she gives me all her old clothes

and has to go out and buy new ones. – Lauren, age 4

. When someone loves you, the way they say your name is different.

You know that your name is safe in their mouth. – Billy, age 4

. If you want to learn to love better, you should start with a friend

who you [don’t like to play with]. – Nikka, age 6

. You really shouldn’t say ‘I love you’ unless you mean it.

But if you mean it, you should say it a lot. People forget. – Jessica, age 8

--Bruce Allen “The Fruit of the Spirit—Love” 10-03 sermoncentral.com, adapted

According to the world, love is an affection, attraction, or attachment to someone or something. It is a warm fuzzy feeling, a sexual desire, a strong enthusiasm, even a score in tennis. Seldom does the world define love as God or according to God’s nature.

Unfortunately in English we only have one word for love, one word that gets used and abused to talk about anything from sex to sports to sitcoms to God. So we need to go back to the original Greek language of the New Testament to capture a better definition for God’s love.

In Greek, there are three primary words for love: *eros*, *philia* and *agape*.

*Eros* is not used in the Scriptures but refers to sensual sexual love. This is where we get the English word erotic.

*Philia* or *Phileo* is a tender affection toward another, especially a family member or close friend.

Think of the city of Philadelphia, the city of brotherly love.

Finally there is *agape*, which is used primarily to describe the nature of God. Agape love is most often defined as unconditional love, and is God’s very nature toward us and God’s desire for our relationships with others. Agape love is selfless, sacrificial, unconditional concern for the well-being of others. Agape is love with no strings attached.

--David Reynolds “The Fruit of the Spirit is Love” 4-04 sermoncentral.com, adapted

Agape love is the very core of who God is. As our Scripture simply says today: God is love.

God is love. God loves you. God loves me. And there is nothing we can do about it.

This agape love of God is love poured out for all people. Young and old, rich and poor, Democrat and Republican, African-American and Caucasian, CEO and returning citizen, Christian or atheist—God’s love is for all God’s children.

We cannot earn God’s love. We may never feel worthy of God’s love. And God loves us whether or not we reciprocate that love. We cannot stop God from loving us any more than we can stop the wind whistling through the trees or the sun rising in the morning.

As Richard Halverson once said:

.. There is nothing you can to do make God love you more!

There is nothing you can do to make God love you less!

His love is Unconditional, Impartial, Everlasting, Infinite, Perfect!

--Richard C. Halverson. sermonillustrations.com

God is love. And God loves you. Period.

Yet the letter of 1 John goes on to proclaim:

“This is how the love of God is revealed to us: God has sent his only Son into the world so that we can live through him. This is love: it is not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son as the sacrifice that deals with our sins.” (v9-10 CEB)

God’s love is not an abstract idea, a powerful emotion or even just a divine attribute. God’s love is lived out through a specific action, practically expressed in the person of Jesus, and specifically expressed through Jesus’ death on the cross for our sins and his resurrection that offers us the hope of new life.

Is that not what we remember and proclaim here today at the table of Holy Communion? This holy mystery of Christ’s body and blood given as an atoning sacrifice for your sins and for mine so that we can live in a new relationship with God.

God’s agape love is given full expression through the person and actions of God’s beloved Son Jesus. Jesus reveals to us the nature of God, God’s love. Jesus teaches us how to live as God’s beloved in this world, in response to God’s love for us. And Jesus takes our sins upon him through his death, and in so doing, forgives us of the many ways we live contrary to the ways of God so that we may then live through him.

If agape love is selfless, sacrificial, unconditional concern for the well-being of others, does that not describe how God loves us through God’s own Son Jesus? Jesus is God in the flesh. And I like how The Message translates John 1:14: “The Word became flesh and blood, and moved into the neighborhood.”

Have you ever had a neighbor move in next door and you thought to yourself, “Uhoh. There goes the neighborhood.” At first glance, you weren’t too keen to get to know your neighbors, for whatever reason. Maybe they are boisterous while you are quiet. Maybe they keep to themselves while you are always showing up at their door. Maybe they don’t look like you or act like you or think like you.

Can you imagine what the religious leaders in first century Jerusalem thought about Jesus? “Uhoh. There goes the neighborhood.” He didn’t conform to the standard rabbinical teachings.

He didn’t pay attention to the kinds of people he hung around, or even touched. He didn’t act or think like them.

Jesus was God incarnate, God in the flesh. Jesus offers to all a glimpse of who God is. Jesus offers to all the gift of life, here and now and in eternity, according to God’s ways rather than the world’s ways. Jesus offers to all a new relationship with God Almighty, a relationship based on God’s love and forgiveness and grace.

Jesus is God’s gift of love to the world.

Before we here today ever consider reaching out in love to our neighbors, we first need to recognize and receive this gift of God’s great love for us.

We are beloved children of God. We are called to abide in God and allow God to abide in us.

We do so through confessing, believing and following Jesus as God’s own Son. We welcome Jesus into the neighborhood of our own lives. We accept Jesus’ invitation to a new loving relationship with our God.

Before we ponder how we love our neighbor, we first need to ponder how we love our God.

“Love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.” (Mt 22:37 NRSV) “Love the Lord your God with all your passion and prayer and intelligence.” (MSG)

How do we connect to God through faith in Jesus Christ with all that we have and all that we are? How do we return God’s love before we ever turn to love another?

How we love God, how we connect with Christ, will vary as much as our personalities, schedules and backgrounds vary around this room. Some will connect with Christ more through intentional, uninterrupted times of prayer; others will connect with Christ more through music and hymns and songs. Some will connect with Christ more through interactions with other Christians, in Bible Study, small groups or one on one conversation; others will connect with Christ more in the stillness of their hearts. Some will connect with Christ through a sudden “aha” moment or holy 2x4; others will connect with Christ through a gradual realization of God’s great love.

There are many ways we can connect with Christ. Our challenge is to do so.

John Wesley instructed Methodists of long ago to do, to “attend to the ordinances of God.” This was one of Wesley’s General Rules. I like better how Bishop Reuben Job has translated Wesley’s words to be “stay in love with God.” They both invite us to develop holy habits that strengthen our relationship with God, spiritual disciplines that draw us deeper in love with God each and every day.

John Wesley listed six ordinances, six means of grace, whereby we strengthen our connection to God. They are: public worship of God, the Lord’s Supper,

private and family prayer, searching the Scriptures,

Bible study, and fasting.

-p. 53 Three Simple Rules by Bishop Job

Bishop Job sees our common essentials as a daily time of prayer; reflection upon and study of Scripture; regular participation in the life of a Christian community, including weekly worship and regular participation in the Lord’s Supper; doing some act of goodness or mercy; and taking opportunities to share with and learn from others who also seek to follow the way of Jesus. He proclaims that “through these practices we find the courage, strength and direction to walk faithfully and with integrity in the way of Jesus.”

-p. 55-56 Three Simple Rules by Bishop Job

In whatever ways you find to connect with Christ, remember that as we do so, we are called to love God with ALL that we are, with our entire being, as a response to God’s great love for us.

We are not called to love God, to connect with Christ, only when we feel like it, or are in crisis or have nothing better to do. We are called to love God, to connect with Christ, with all that we are all of the time. We are to be all in. For is not that the way God loves us?

When we are all in for Jesus, then, and only then, can we ever begin to truly love our neighbor.

The love of God and love of neighbor is not an either/or; it is a both/and. We are called by Jesus to love both God and neighbor. Faith and works go hand in hand. What we believe calls us to action. Our actions ought to be grounded in what we believe.

We cannot love one without loving the other, God and neighbor, although many times we try.

If we try to love others without loving God, eventually our selfishness will get in the way. Eventually we will give up when faced with someone who is hard to love.

If we try to love God without loving others, 1 John says then we are not being true Christians.

Bluntly, today’s Word declares:

Verse 8- Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love.

Verse 20- Those who say, “I love God,” and hate their brothers or sisters, are liars; for those who do not love a brother or sister whom they have seen, cannot love God whom they have not seen.

Loving God and loving neighbor go hand in hand. They are two sides of the same coin.

And they are Jesus’ mandate to you and I today, and throughout this series.

“‘You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.’ This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ (MT 22:37b-39)

Consider Jesus’ mandate this way. Rev. Michael Slaughter, former lead pastor at Ginghamsburg UMC, says our mission is to bring God’s party to the neighborhood. What is that party? God’s love for us, of course! Our Scripture today declares it with these words, “Beloved, since God loved us so much, we also ought to love one another.” (v11)

..Carlyle Marney once told about an old man who was asked, "Have you ever seen God?"

He said, "No, but I have known a couple of Jesuses in my lifetime." That is what John is talking about. No one has ever seen God, but what you can see is God's love. --Mark Trotter, Collected Sermons, sermons.com, adapted

If you have been glued to the news out of Texas this week, you have seen strangers reaching out to strangers, churches who have opened their doors in spite of damage, neighbors watching out for their neighbors, the best of humanity caring for one another.

We are good at helping in times of crisis. Yet loving our God and loving our neighbor day after day is often harder to do.

Last weekend Vicki reminded us to first see ourselves as beloved children of God. She went on to say look at your neighbor and see them as well as God’s beloved children. Since God is love, we are then called to love whom God loves. And to not simply say it, but to live it. To make love a verb. To strive for agape love in our relationships with all God’s children. For as we connect with Christ, we are then called to be Jesus to others.

Loving others as God has loved us is a daunting call, yet remember—we do not love out of our own strength. We love others in response to God’s love for us. We love others led by the Spirit of God. We love others following the example of Jesus. Or put another way, God loves the world through us.

The only way we can truly love others is through the love we have received from God through Christ. The more grow in love with God, the more God will call us to share that love with our neighbors.

And the more we recognize that God’s love is agape love, the more we will recognize the need for such sacrificial love in our lives and in our world.

I John 4:19 proclaims, “We love because God first loved us.”

As you enjoy your holiday weekend, as you go through the routines of this week, give thanks for God’s great love for you.

Consider one way to grow in your love of God, one way to strengthen your connection with Christ, one way to work on a holy habit this week. Maybe it is intentionally reading New Testament passages that deal with love. Maybe it is spending 10 more minutes in prayer. Maybe it is giving up a meal out and donating that money to UMCOR. Find one way this week to connect anew with Christ.

Then, in response to God’s love, may we love others with the love that we have received.

May it be so. Let us pray.