5-18/19-19 Love in Jesus’ Name Rev. Amy Haines

John 13:31-35 Graduate Sunday

A group of social scientists asked some children, “What does love mean?” The answers they got were broader and deeper than anyone could have imagined.

“When my grandmother got arthritis, she couldn’t bend over and paint her toenails anymore. So my grandfather does it for her all the time, even when his hands got arthritis, too. That’s love.”

“When someone loves you, the way they say your name is different. You know that your name is safe in their mouth.”

“Love is when you go out to eat and give somebody most of your french fries without making them give you any of theirs.”

“Love is what makes you smile when you’re tired.”

“If you want to learn to love better, you should start with a friend whom you hate.”

“When you tell someone something bad about yourself and you’re scared they won’t love you anymore. But then you get surprised because not only do they still love you, they love you even more.”

“Love is like a little old woman and a little old man who are still friends even after they know each other so well.”

“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.”

“When they crucified Jesus, God could have said magic words to make the nails fall off the cross, but he didn’t. That’s love.”

—Various sources, shared in “The Maundatum Mission” 5-2-10 homileticsonline.com, edited

What does love look like to you? I imagine our answers would be as varied as the children’s responses. We might share stories of romance or stories of our pets, stories of good deeds or stories of close friends, stories of sacrifice or stories of deep affection.

While we may say we love our favorite TV show, our favorite sports team or our favorite restaurant, true love is really all about our relationships. How do we act in relation to others?

What of ourselves do we offer to another? What do we receive from the love of others?

Our English language does a disservice to love, since we only have one word to describe a range of love. The Greek language, however, in which the New Testament was written, has several words for love. There is a word for romantic love, a word for friendship, and even a word for God’s love.

God’s love is agape love and is shown best through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus.

God’s agape love is love that is sacrificial and selfless, love that is above any expectation of love returned, love that is unconditional. God’s agape love is the way we are called to love, when we love like Jesus.

Yes, this agape love is not easy. This love is not the warm fuzzy love of the world. This love is not the “love only when you feel like it to whom you feel like it” kind of love. This love has no conditions. This is love that forgives, love that risks, love that reaches out when the world says to walk away.

Today Jesus calls us to agape love, through his final charge to his disciples. Jesus says to them, “Love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another.”

Love one another. This is not given as an optional choice—do this only when you feel like it.

This is given as a mandate, a commandment—do this. Period. Hard stop.

Love one another—just as I have loved you.

These words are powerful, as we look back and reflect on Jesus’ care for the sick and outcast, his welcome of sinners and women, his call to ordinary people to follow God’s ways. He loved in radical ways that showed God’s radical love for us.

But consider the context when Jesus’ spoke these words, and they become even more important for our life together today.

In the Gospel of John, Jesus’ mandate to love one another is part of the Final Discourse, Jesus’ final words to his disciples as they are seated around the Passover table.

Unbeknownst to the disciples, this is Jesus’ final night with them, before his death on the cross.

Only in looking back did the disciples understand that Jesus’ glory had begun that night, as the wheels were put in motion for Jesus’ death on the cross. Yet what the world saw as weakness, God gave new meaning. For through Jesus’ death on the cross God forgave the sins of the world.

Already on this Passover night, Jesus had knelt at the feet of his disciples, and like a lowly servant had washed the disciples’ feet. After doing so he gave them a mandate to be servants, to serve one another with humility and love.

Following that action, Jesus informed the disciples that one of them would betray him. While they all questioned and denied such an accusation, Judas then left to do just that, to betray Jesus to the religious leaders. And Jesus watched him go.

After Jesus spoke these words of love to his disciples, he then informed Peter that Peter would deny him that very night before the cock crowed. Of course Peter denied the denial.

Jesus’ mandate to love as he loved is a powerful reminder to live by God’s agape love. Yet these words take on an even deeper meaning when we realize they are spoken between betrayal and denial, between being a servant washing feet and being a savior dying on the cross. These words are even more powerful when we recognize that Jesus calls us to God’s agape love in the midst of the harsh realities of this world.

If Jesus can love in between betrayal and denial, can we love in between despair and hope?

Can we love in the midst of the pressure to succeed as well as the call to be our unique selves?

Can we love in the face of hurt, hearing a call to forgive?

Pastor David Lose once said,

“I find it striking that these are the words Jesus’ leaves with his disciples. I mean, he could have said, “Go out and die with me.” Or, “keep the faith.” Or, “when I am gone go out and teach and preach to all the world.” Or, well, any number of things. But instead he offered this simple and challenging word, “love another.” Why? Because this kind of love is the hallmark not just of God and Jesus but also of the Christian church. As in the old camp song, Jesus agrees that the whole world will know we are Christians not by our sermons or our sacraments or our festivals or our buildings or our crucifixes or our family values … but by our love. It’s just that important.

--David Lose “On Loving—and Not Loving—One Another” 4-21-13 workingpreacher.org

Jesus declared: “I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.” (v34-35)

The love of Jesus is called to be the mark of a Christian. We are called indeed to love in Jesus’ name.

Yet look closer—Jesus’ final words of love are not a grandiose call to love the world. This is not an abstract song like “Get Together” by The Youngbloods. You know, the song that goes, “C'mon people now

Smile on your brother

Ev'rybody get together

Try to love one another right now.”

Instead, Jesus’ call to love is closer than the world—love one another at home. Love one another in the church. Love the people you spend the most time with outside your family. Love each other, all you who follow me.

As the letter of 1 John proclaims: "Those who love God must love their brothers and sisters also." (1 Jn. 4:21)

Jesus’ radical call to love is not simply to love the stranger, but to begin with love to those closest to us.

Yet how much harder is it for us to love those closest to us. How much harder is it for us to love those we know who disagree with us. How much harder is it for us to love those who have disappointed us. How much harder is it for us to love a brother or sister in Christ.

Unfortunately, over the years I have seen church members fall out of love with one another over gossip, over sitting in the wrong pew, and over the color of new carpet. I have seen church members not act loving toward one another when they discuss changing music styles in worship or fighting over priorities of ministries or want their own way without considering another way.

If you think of the local congregation as a big family, think also how hard it is to always love your family members. No family is perfect, and no household will ever agree 100% of the time on all things. Yet families cannot allow differences to divide them. Instead they bond together by love.

In college I lived in a sorority house on campus for one year. Talk about differences of opinion, as we covered three different classes and many different majors in one house! There were times we struggled to love one another. On most Saturday nights I was frustrated that the music would not be turned down until 2 am. There were times that as a Christian I had to learn to say no and stand my ground. Yet, if anyone else on campus would hurt one of us, we would band together, and stand together in support and dare I say love for one another.

No church is perfect. The closer we become to one another, the more we risk being disappointed by one another. The more we open up about our views on the Bible and faith, the more we risk disagreeing with others who have a different view. The more we love, the more we risk change. Yet the more we love, the more we will also get to know one another. And the more we know one another, the more we will trust each other. And the more we trust each other, the more we will stand together in love.

If we don’t love one another, how then can we love our enemies? How then can we love the world around us? What kind of Christian witness are we really offering to our local community if we cannot live by love?

Graduates, wherever you find yourself next year, find a congregation that does a good job of loving God, loving one another, and loving their neighbor. Remember that no one church is perfect, yet we are all called to love. And we still need one another in the body of Christ, as imperfect and as imbalanced as we may be.

Mike Glenn, in a recent blog post closed with these thoughts on the church. He said:

…“It’s not enough for each one of us to have a relationship with Jesus and run off to live by ourselves. Each of us is called by Christ to be responsible to and for each other. The church is the bride of Christ. The church is the body of Christ. Enough said.

“The church is like a wagon train. We bump and rattle along, and everyone is sure they can go faster by themselves. Then, the bad guys show up on the horizon and you sure are glad to have the other wagons circle up. That’s church. You show up week after week, and you wonder if anything is happening and then…BAM…life kicks you. Your brothers and sisters show up.

Someone comes by to pray with you. Someone sends a meal. Another friend calls while another one watches the kids…and there is something about the love of the church that brings us the love of Christ in ways nobody else can. Nobody makes it alone. Not on this journey we call life…it’s just too hard. Even the Lone Ranger had Tonto.

“Yeah, I know the church is messed up. Why should that surprise us? The church is made up of messed up people. Think about it. The church is the only place in the world that opens its doors and begs for the broken, wounded, lost and confused; but if the church ceases to be a place where broken people are welcome, we cease to be the church at all. Come to think of it, we should be surprised the church gets as close as it does.

“For some reason, Jesus sees something in the church. He loves the church. If you love Jesus, you’ll love the church, too. Just ask Simon Peter.”

-preaching.com Mike Glenn at his Truthful Conversations Blog

responding to “[Why I Hate Religion but Love Jesus](http://www.truthfulconversations.com/love-jesus-but-not-his-church/).”

Yes, we struggle currently as a denomination with rhetoric coming from across the theological spectrum that is not loving or uplifting. Yes, people like the members of Westboro Baptist Church that spread hate, not love, give all Christians a bad name. Yes, there are many local congregations that struggle to love one another, let alone their neighbors.

In spite of what others may be doing, we here today are called as a local congregation to love one another, as Christ has loved us, as an example of Christ’s love.

So how do you think we are doing? Are we building up one another or tearing down one another? Do we recognize and strive to make the dance work that is this building and our ministries or are we only concerned about the space and energy for our own ministries?

Is our love reaching out to all ages?

Like most congregations, I believe that there are ways we truly love and care for one another.

And there are times we must confess our selfish and unloving attitudes toward one another.

There are times I love to brag on your ministries. And there are times I must confess I struggle with negativity toward selfish ways.

Yet we are still called to be the church. Together. I am glad that I am here with you for this moment, for this time. We are still called to love one another. For in doing so, we are an example of love to the world around us.

Think of one time you chose to love in this past week, whether at church or school or work or home. What made you choose to love?

Now think of one time you struggled to love in the past week. What made it difficult to love another?

Lucy and Snoopy were once talking together in Charles Schultz’s familiar comic strip “Peanuts”.

Lucy shouts “There are times when you really bug me! I must admit, however, there are times when I feel like giving you a hug.” In a nonchalant manner Snoopy responded, “That’s the way I am, Lucy, huggable and buggable!”

-Sermons Illustrated May/June 1990 on preaching.com

Jesus calls us to love one another as he has loved us. We are often challenged by the words, “love one another.” Then we are even more stressed by the addition, “just as I have loved you.”

These words from Jesus often sound to our ears like a challenge.

Yet today I want you to hear Jesus’ words as a promise. Love as I have loved you, Jesus declared. Today he says to us, remember that you are loved. Remember that you are surrounded by God’s forgiving grace. Remember that your past does not define your future.

God’s sanctifying grace seeks to shape and form you so that you can grow in the ways you love in Jesus’ name.

Jesus never gave up on loving those around him. Jesus even loved Peter, who denied him, and Judas, who betrayed him. Jesus continues to love you and I today, even when we are not very lovable, and even when we struggle to love one another.

So have hope, that we can love in Jesus’ name.

…Years ago Ben Kingsley starred as the main character in the motion picture GANDHI. He spent months preparing for the role, visiting the various Indian locales Gandhi had frequented. He even learned to spin cotton thread on a wooden wheel while holding conversations as Gandhi did. The physical resemblance between Gandhi and Kingsley was almost startling. After filming a scene in a village south of Delhi, Kingsley stepped out of a car, and an elderly peasant knelt to touch his feet. Embarrassed, Kingsley explained that he was merely an actor playing Gandhi.

"We know," replied the villager, "but through you he will surely live again."

The question this raises is, "Does the Son of God live again through us?

-Billy Strayhorn epulpit.net 6-13-99

If we are authentically striving to live as disciples of Jesus, then yes, Jesus will live again through us. His love and grace, his forgiveness and welcome, can and does live through us.

Wherever the next year finds you, may you love in Jesus’ name. Love new classmates, love new friends, love new coworkers, love new neighbors, love new brothers and sisters in Christ.

Love one another as Jesus has loved you. In humility and grace, in boldness and welcome, in companionship and care. Love as you have been loved. Then may others see Jesus through our love.

That is my high hope, and my fervent prayer. For all of us.

May it be so. Let us pray.