5-8/9-21 No Greater Love Rev. Amy Haines

John 15:9-17

Jesus declares these words around the Passover table to his disciples and closest companions, hours before his arrest, on the night prior to his death. These words of love are spoken to disciples who will betray and deny Jesus. Knowing that, Jesus offers parting words to encourage them and to remind them who and whose they are. Listen now to John 15:9-17…

When notorious skeptic Robert Ingersoll was in his heyday, two college students went to hear him lecture. As they walked down the street after the lecture, one said to the other, “Well, I guess he knocked the props out from under Christianity, didn’t he?”

The other said, “No, I don’t think he did. Ingersoll did not explain my mother’s life, and until he can explain my mother’s life I will stand by my mother’s God.”

-James S. Hewett, Illustrations Unlimited, Tyndale, 1972, p. 381.

Remember today the women whose lives were examples of love for you, guiding you on your faith journey. Maybe they were your mothers or grandmothers or aunts; maybe they were your teachers or Sunday School teachers or preachers; maybe they were your coworkers or friends or sisters in Christ.

Remember their lives today, what they have shown and taught you, and give thanks. Online or in person, share a story of their example of faith to another today, or if they are still living, tell them thanks.

Hopefully one of the things we have been taught is what Jesus says to us today: love one another. Love one another. Easy to say, isn’t it? But how much harder to live!

We live in an increasingly polarized society that does not want us to love those who think or act or believe differently than we do. That polarity has seeped into the church, on both the essentials and non-essentials of faith. Christians collectively are now known more for what we are against than who we follow. So we may hear these words of Jesus today and believe they are unrealistic for our lives, and for our faith.

Yet, these are the words of Jesus, and if we claim to be his disciples, these are words we are not only called to follow, but also commanded to live by.

 “This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you.”

“You are my friends if you do what I command you.”

Rarely if ever did Jesus use the words of command. When he did, it was always a call to love God or love one another. Yet, have you ever tried to command someone else to love?

Husbands and wives whose love has long since departed. Mothers and daughters who struggle with a history of non-loving words and actions. Believers with different life experiences that shape their faith in very different ways.

We cannot force people to love. As the old song says, “You can’t hurry love, you just have to wait.” You can’t hurry it and you can’t order it, either.

Yet, here, Jesus is commanding his followers to love one another. What is this about?

Jesus’ love is not about sentimentality or selfishness. Jesus’ love is not about attraction or affection. Jesus’ command to love is less about feelings and more about intentional actions, based out of an abiding relationship with Jesus.

Remember this command is only to Jesus’ followers. This command only makes sense in the greater context of John 15, as branches living off the vine of Jesus. As those who abide in him and he abides in them. As those who seek to live by Jesus’ ways.

As diverse a group as the first disciples were, as diverse as we are today, Jesus is commanding love for one another within the body of Christ. Hate is not an option. Division is not an option.

Love is the only option as those who claim the name of Jesus. Without love for one another, we cannot love the world around us.

Only out of an ongoing relationship with Jesus will we learn to love one another. And only once we learn to love one another, the other branches connected to the vine, can we learn to love our neighbors. The more we abide as branches in the vine, the more we connect with Jesus, then the more we know God’s love, and the more we can share God’s love.

..Max Lucado once observed, “People who live long lives together eventually begin to sound alike, talk alike, and even think alike. As we walk with God, we take on his thoughts, his principles, his attitudes. We take on his heart.’”

-- Leadership from the Heart Participant Book p.28

As we take on his heart, we take on his love.

As we take on his love, we are then called to share that love with others.

As we take on Jesus’ love, our love becomes intentional and sacrificial. This love is a choice more than an emotion. This love is sacrificial, choosing to follow Jesus’ sacrificial love for others.

How many mothers and grandmothers are remembered today for their sacrificial love for their families? Mothers who ate little so their children had enough to eat. Grandmothers who worked tirelessly to keep the family fed and clothed. Mothers who put their careers on hold to care for children or for sick relatives. Grandmothers who went to work when their men went to war.

Who have you known, female or male, who live a life of sacrificial love for others?

Chris Lake once lived in Geneva, Nebraska, population 2,323, and tells the story of the sacrifice of their volunteer EMTs, a story that can be retold in small communities around the country.

[Chris shares]

..Volunteering as an EMT in a town the size of Geneva is a huge commitment and changes how you live, work and play. Because there is no paid staff for emergency response, folks like Eric carry a pager that is loud and obnoxious so that at 3 a.m. it can wake a person up and get him or her out of the house to where he or she is needed. The way the system works in Geneva is every third day and every third weekend at least one person is asked to stay within three minutes of the fire station and be ready to respond to any call at a moment’s notice.

Eric is one of those people who does just that. He carries the pager and it is a burden, but a load he carries not for the glory, not because it is always fun, but because he wants to keep the community safe. While folks go off anytime they want with little regard to being tied to their community, people like Eric don’t have the luxury. There’s little thanks for the job; most people just assume that if they dial 911, that someone will come and help them. They don’t realize that real sacrifice is made daily and weekly so that there will be someone to show up and help if called.

—Chris Lake in e-mail correspondence with Homiletics.

“Pinky Love” 5-17-09 homileticsonline.com

Our sacrificial love for others follows the example of Christ’s sacrifice of love offered for us on the cross. We may never sacrifice our lives literally for others. Instead, we may be sacrificial in our care for others, such as EMT Eric, or sacrificial with our generosity, such as those who regularly tithe and give to various ministries, or sacrificial with our time, investing in others as mentors, leaders, and friends.

Consider the ways this past year you shared and continue to share sacrificial love for one another. First, you agreed to stay home for an extended period of time. You continue to wear masks to worship. You support one another through cards and calls. You support your community through Christmas gifts and food pantry items. You invest in one another and in children and youth through study and fellowship and mentoring and preschool children’s church.

We learn such sacrificial love through abiding in Jesus. There is no greater love.

As Jesus said:

“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. ” (12-15)

Jesus calls us friends, not servants, as we follow his call to love. Servants don’t know what the master is doing, or why he does what he does. Servants are not invested in the relationship.

Friends, however, are invested in the relationship. Committed friends will do anything for one another.

Do you have that one friend you know you can call at any time and for any reason? Jesus calls his disciples friends like that.

He does so because he has spent three years investing in these disciples, teaching and empowering and sending them forth in his name. Jesus is confident that following his resurrection they will continue to bear fruit because of their abiding relationship.

Jesus reminded these disciples he abides in them, he loves them, and he intentionally chose them. They are the ones appointed to go and bear his fruit, share his ways, live by his love, expand his mission.

Have you ever been recruited? You may know a little of this feeling of being chosen. If you watched any of the NFL draft, those young men were recruited to play by specific teams.

Some companies will pursue certain applicants, choosing them intentionally to build their team.

In today’s competitive housing market, households are being recruited to sell even when they don’t have any intention to sell.

Today, Jesus also calls us friends, not servants. Today, Jesus continues to abide in us, invest in us, choose us as his followers so that his mission continues with those whom he loves. Today, Jesus commands us: love one another.

Through thick and thin, through agreement and disagreement, through celebration and sorrow, trust one another. Abide together. Rely on each other. Love one another.

When we love, our love is evident in our fruits. Our ways reflect Jesus’ ways, which reflect God’s ways. We live by love and compassion, forgiveness and grace, kindness and inclusion, trust and hope.

We live out the stories Jesus’ taught such as the prodigal son’s father and the good shepherd, the Lord’s Prayer and the beatitudes.

We live out the faith evident in those who have gone before us, even when we stumble, we doubt, we fear, we proclaim. Think of Peter and Thomas and the women insisting the resurrection was true. We follow in their footsteps, learning how to live as branches grafted onto the vine of Jesus.

We live out the love Jesus showed to others, in often surprising ways. Think of his care for despised Samaritans and Gentiles, for the outcast and for women.

When we live by Jesus’ ways, when we love one another, when we bear his fruit, then we experience joy.

Jesus declared: **“**I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete.”

This is not the joy that is fleeting emotion, but the joy that is an assurance of God’s faithfulness as we abide and follow and love like Jesus. This is the joy that keeps us going, when we see planted seeds of faith take root in others. This is the joy that we experience when we love like Jesus.

There is no greater love than this, that you love one another as you are loved. That you lay down your lives for your friends, your family, your community of faith. And together, declare the good news of a loving God and a crucified and risen Savior to the world around us.

As disciples of Jesus this commandment is not optional; rather it is the foundation of our faith.

A secular second century historian once declared: "What lives these Christians produce."

That has always been the essence of the Christian faith-- making love visible.

--John Stroman “Making Love Visible” sermonsuite.com

May we be known not for what we are against, but known for the love we share, first to one another and then to the world around us. There is no greater love than the love of Jesus.

May it be so. Let us pray.