

A Lesson on Love, John 15:9-17
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Today our texts are about love. Not a bad topic for Mother's Day – or any day of the year, for that matter. But when I first saw these texts, I admit I said, “Really Lord? Love? Everyone knows about love. Isn't that a little bland, a little trite? Do we really need a sermon on love?” And then this thought came to me: “Think about it. Look around. It's not what you think. They know; but they don't know.”

Well, thinking that this could be the voice of the Holy Spirit, I started to think about it. I did a little looking around. And what I found is this: The topic of love is everywhere. And love is valued – just take a look at Facebook. Everyone values love. But there is also a crying need for love. And you don't need to look very far to see this is true.

So let's talk about love. It's a favorite theme of books and movies. Various forms of art (especially music) lift up the power of love. Love has been the source and the motivation of many great deeds. But some people seemed to have missed out on real love. Globally, children are orphaned or abandoned through war or natural disaster. The slave trade is growing internationally, whether for sex or for labor, affecting people of all ages. There are a lot of people in the world who don't know love; they are crying out for it.

Let's look a little closer to home. In America, there are many healthy expressions of love – strong marriages and families, people reaching out to others through random acts of kindness or through fundraising efforts. It's always uplifting to read these stories. But at the same time, our culture tends to superficialize love. Just flip through one of the popular magazines, like *People*. Almost every article, every ad treats love in a superficial way: who's dating whom; how to find real passion; how to make yourself more attractive. One article caught my eye. It was by a young woman who had recently married. She lamented that fact that there was nothing on TV for women like her. It's all about the singles scene, and now she felt out of the loop. The twenty-something generation has been called the most connected generation ever; at the same time, it is the most isolated. And isn't it ironic that today the phrase “making love” can at times be used to describe gratification but without love itself present? Let's face it, our culture doesn't always know love; yet, it is crying out for it.

Let's focus one step closer. What about you and me? Everyone wants love in their lives. We want to love and to be loved. You may have noticed the license plates we have on our cars. One says JAB ! JCB; the other says JCB ! JAB. I'm JAB; Jim's JCB. What I like most is that my car says JCB loves JAB. It is wonderful to love; it is even better to be loved. What about those who have no one to love them? Around Christmas time our son, Peter, took his family to a homeless shelter to donate some food. They happened to get there around the supper hour, and so his small children got their first glimpse of people who were homeless, who were lined up for a hot meal. Peter tried to explain their situation to his 7-year old son – no job, no money, no house, no food. But what his little boy couldn't wrap his mind around was this: no family. “No family!!!” he exclaimed. He couldn't imagine it. No people to live with? To care for each other? To love? That was beyond his scope.

We are created as social beings; we wither and die without human contact; some go crazy. Prison authorities report that the most cruel punishment of all is to put an inmate into isolation for a long period of time. We are relational beings – we need friends, family, loved ones. Relationships are the building blocks of society, beginning with marriage and family. We cry out for love.

Jesus knew this. He talked about love – a lot. He told people God loved them with a great and lasting love. He talked about loving their neighbors and even their enemies. He told them not to waste their love on *things*. (You may have heard it said: *Love people; use things*. So often we do the opposite: we *use people and love things*.) In two of our lessons today, we are *commanded* to love one another. The whole New Testament is filled with discussions about love, and it all starts with Jesus. In fact, it strikes me that the Christian focus on love is unique among world religions.

In our lesson today Jesus teaches his disciples how to love. It's not the superficial kind. Jesus' love *remains*; it lasts. He says, "This is how you *remain* in my love." His love is not that of a fickle lover, but that of a loyal and steadfast friend – love that remains, through thick and thin.

Jesus does more than *talk* about love. He *shows* his disciples how to love. He models love by washing their feet like a common slave; by giving up his life for them on the cross. Love goes the extra mile. Love doesn't worry about position or pride. Love sometimes requires sacrifice.

Did you notice Jesus never uses the word, "feel?" Instead, he commands love. Now, you can't command a feeling. You can't require someone to feel love for you or for anyone else. But you can command an action. Love is not dependent on feelings. Feelings are roller coasters. They are not dependable. They can be influenced by a poor night of sleep or a stubbed toe. Love isn't always a feeling; but it is always an action.

A young family had, as their motto, "Love is action; love is sacrifice." And so the father shouldn't have been surprised when his little girl, 8 years old, put that into practice. They had gone to the petting zoo, conveniently located next to a hardware store. Dad gave each of his children, ages 5 and 8, a quarter for their entrance fee and took off to check out some tools. He was absorbed in his search until he realized that his little girl was trailing behind him, looking forlorn. He picked her up and asked why she wasn't petting the animals. "Because it cost 50 cents to get in," she explained; "so I gave my quarter to Johnny." And then, with tears running down her face, she repeated the family motto, "Love is sacrifice." Well, what do you think her dad did next? Perhaps not what you'd think. Although he had 50 cents burning a hole in his pocket, he restrained himself from giving it to her. Instead, he allowed her sacrifice to be complete as together, from the other side of the fence, they watched Johnny pet the furry little animals. Dad never offered the entrance fee to his daughter and she never asked for it.

You see, love always pays a price. Love always costs something. Love is expensive. When you love, benefits accrue to someone else's account. Love is for the other, not for yourself. Love gives; it doesn't grab. That little girl gave her quarter to her brother and wanted to follow through to the end. She wanted to live up to her family motto. *Love is action; love is sacrifice.*

That's what Jesus was trying to teach his disciples that night – the night he was betrayed; the night before he gave his life on the cross. It was the most important lesson he could give: a lesson on love. It is love, Jesus taught, that makes his followers stand out. In fact, it's the distinguishing mark of all Christians (John 13:35). Is this true for you? Do you stand out – because of your love? Does St Timothy's?

If that makes you feel a little uncomfortable, it should. It has the same effect on me. It makes me think, would someone know that I'm a Christian because of the way I love? Boy, I hope so, but I'm not so sure. Or put it another way: If you were on trial for being a Christian, would there be enough evidence to convict you? It all comes down to the way you act out your love. How many extra miles would you go?

Back in the days before cell phones, a salesman called his wife from a pay phone in a distant city. When his coins ran out, he quickly said his good-bye and hung up. As he started to walk away, the phone rang. He picked up the receiver expecting to be informed of extra charges. But the operator said, "I thought you'd like to know. Just after you hung up, your wife said, "I love you." Sometimes it's what you don't have to do that counts; it's that reaching out, sometimes in simple ways. Love goes the extra mile.

William Temple (former Archbishop of Canterbury) said this: "The Christian Church is unique among all human institutions because it alone is chiefly concerned with those who are outside its own life." The Church is to be outward-directed, not inward-directed. It's entire reason for being is to reach out to those still outside the faith, to attract and change them. To offer a gift: the love of God – a love greater than your own. A hardened addict once roamed the streets of San Francisco, looking for a way to end his life. On a whim, he entered one of Cityteam's recovery centers. There he was greeted by a guy who treated him like his long-lost brother. The man said later, "He was just a little guy, but he was full of God's love. You could just feel it! I was a total mess but this guy loved me -- and what a huge impact that had on my life." The addict found hope in Christ and his life was turned around.

You and I are Christians; loving others should be a driving force in all we do. Christians cannot stand still. We should be restless, always looking for someone to serve. It is not enough to find a like-minded congregation, comfortable and cozy like an old shoe, and settle in. We should not be wearing loafers but running shoes – that's who we are as Christians. That is the distinguishing mark of Jesus' followers. Moving out; not settling in. It's the way God loves us.

Henri Nouwen was a priest, a brilliant theologian and popular speaker. But then his superior assigned him a task that at first seemed a waste of Nouwen's talents: the care of a severely handicapped man. Every day it took Nouwen two hours to help him dress, put him into a wheelchair and feed him as the man drooled and grunted but showed no signs of comprehension. Nouwen said later that it was hard, at first. But gradually he saw that this must be what it is like for God to love us – "spiritually uncoordinated, retarded, able to respond with what must seem to God like inarticulate grunts and groans..." Still: God loves us; he takes time with us and places a high value on our relationship with him. Ultimately Nouwen concluded that the goal of every Christian is to "continually recognize the Lord's voice, face and touch in every person we meet."

Jesus said, *Love one another as I have loved you.* That's a pretty high standard. He loves you with a very great love. In fact, you and I are rich in love. Our bank account is full; we can afford to be lavish with love because God has poured it out on you and me extravagantly. Can you spend God's extravagant love on someone else? It takes some work, some time, some intentionality. So, how do you do that?

Here are a few steps. First you pray, asking God to fill you with his love. (Remember that love is not a feeling.) You read your Bible, being reminded of all that God has done for his people throughout the years, how he has been utterly faithful. You read on, reflecting on the blessings God has given you; how he has filled your life with people who have loved and cared for you; how he sent his Son to die for you. Then you thank him for all these things. As he fills your heart with gratitude, ask him who you might reach out to. How might you serve that person. Then take the first few steps in obedience to Jesus' command to love. Just start with one. Befriend that person. It may take time. It may take effort. It may require sacrifice. But as followers of Jesus, we have no option. It is his way; it is the only way. He commands us.

You know, when it comes to love, we may not know as much as we think. Love seems like such a simple thing, so universal, so well-known. We may ask, do we really need a lesson on love? But as it turns out, love is so profound, so needed, that we can never learn enough. People cry out for love, and yet so often settle for a cheap substitute of the real thing.

Henry Miller (the American writer) said, "The one thing we can never get enough of is love. And the one thing we never give enough is love." Jesus says we are the ones to give it. It's not an option; it's a command for all his followers. And it is made possible because of the way Jesus first loved us. (Prayer) Amen.