

John 15:9-17

Sixth Sunday of Easter (Series B)

Lessons for the Day: Acts 10:34-48; 1 John 5:1-8; John 15:9-17

Did He Have to Tell Us That?

May 6, 2018

“As the Father has loved me, so have I 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. These things I have spoken to you, that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be full. “This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. Greater love has no one than this, that someone lay down his life for his friends. You are my friends if you do what I command you. No longer do I call you servants, for the servant does not know what his master is doing; but I have called you friends, for all that I have heard from my Father I have made known to you. You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you that you should go and bear fruit and that your fruit should abide, so that whatever you ask the Father in my name, he may give it to you. These things I command you, so that you will love one another.””

Dear Friends in Christ, and fellow redeemed:

I once heard someone say that the rarest commodity in Hollywood was not fame, as some might expect, but love. I imagine they meant it in a different way than I am taking it, but anyone who has ever stood in line at the grocery store has probably noticed the tabloid magazines that talk about the marital breakups of the celebrity set: Channing and Jenna, Chris and Anna, Usher and Grace, and so on. Even Miss Piggy and Kermit the Frog haven’t been able to maintain their romantic relationship! If you don’t know who those people are, don’t feel bad, I really don’t know much about them, either. I think two things when I see these magazines: first, why are people so obsessed with the private lives of these people, and the sordid details of all this stuff. And, as with all marriages that fall apart, I wonder what happened to the love that supposedly brought these people together in the first place.

Hal David said it years ago: *“What the world needs now is love, sweet love. That’s the only thing there’s just too little of”*. But that truth was expressed long before Hal David. When the disciples asked Jesus about the signs of the end of the world, Jesus told them: *“And then many will fall away and betray one another and hate one another. And many false prophets will arise and lead many astray. And because lawlessness will be increased, the love of many will grow cold.”* (Matthew 24:10–12, ESV) Isn’t that something we see happening in our world today? It happens among nations; it happens in families. It can happen at every stage of life. A couple sitting in their rocking chairs had been married 50 years, but things had gotten rocky in their relationship. They had been arguing, and things were not right between them. So the wife says to her husband, “Dear, things haven’t been good between us lately. Maybe we should get off these rocking chairs and get down on our knees and just pray that the good Lord would take one of us home.” She pauses and then adds, “Then I can go and live with my sister.”

We can understand that the world, burdened and stained by sin, more accustomed to hate and indifference than love, needs to learn a lesson in love. But did He really need to tell us that? As Jesus speaks to us today in our text, He tells us: *As the Father has loved me, so have I 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. These things I have spoken to you, that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be full. “This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you.* It seems strange, especially for us, the children of God, that we actually have to be told that we need to love one another. Isn’t love just something that is natural to our lives because we are the people of God?

If we were still in the Garden of Eden things would be different, but we live in a world tainted by sin. We live with the daily struggle of our own sin—and with it, our own lovelessness. We often have confused ideas of what it means to love. We need to be reminded that we are to go on loving one another. Jesus uses the verb “to love,” five times and the noun “love,” four times in our text. It is a lesson that He wants us to learn. It is a lesson that is fundamental to all that we are in relation to Him and to one another.

And so Jesus tells us: *This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you.* The general sense of those words is not that we are to start loving one another, but that we go on loving one another, as we live in the love that Jesus has for us. We do indeed know from the Scriptures that *We love because he first loved us.* (1 John 4:19 - ESV) We love *as* He loved us. Jesus expects that we, who know His perfect, sacrificial, unconditional, and everlasting love will love one another in the same way, because we are joined to Him, the Living Vine, through His gracious work for our salvation.

I suppose I should have picked the hymn, *“They’ll Know We are Christians By Our Love”*– in fact, Jesus says: **“By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.”** (John 13:35, ESV) There are, indeed, many ways in which we, as God’s people, show love to one another. I thank God for the blessings of this congregation, and the overall spirit of joy and love and harmony that we see among us. We do love one another, and that love is manifest in us as we pray for one another and as enjoy fellowship with one another. That love is made known when we come together to help out with the things like Vacation Bible School or support the youth in a fund-raiser, or give to help a family in need. Our love is evident when we encourage the work of our Sunday School and when we speak a kind word to a fellow member of Christ’s body who is troubled and downcast. Love is made known when we send a card to assure someone we are thinking of them. Love is made known when we worship together, when we grieve with one another, and when we joke with one another.

These are the things that we should see in the church. After all, we are joined with Christ, whose love for us is perfect. Jesus begins His lesson on love by telling the disciples: **“I am the vine; you are the branches. Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing.”** (John 15:5, ESV) Jesus then goes on to tell the disciples and us: **You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you that you should go and bear fruit and that your fruit should abide.** As He talks about the fruit we will bear, He speaks of love–the love for God that clings to the truth of His Word with obedient, trusting hearts. He speaks of the love that we are to have for the other branches of His body, which is the lesson that Peter learned and proclaimed in our first lesson today. The church that is rooted in Christ, the True Vine; the church that knows His love at work for us, will be a church filled with love that the world can know and see and envy.

There is an urgency and passion as Jesus teaches us that we are to love one another. He also raises our thoughts of love to the highest level. The word He uses for love, the word *agape* speaks of a love that is far beyond feeling and any human conception of love. It is an unconditional, deliberate and willful love. This is the love that our world really needs. This is the love that will flow from the faithful, trusting heart. This is the love that will mark us as the people of God.

Is that the love we see at work in us? One commentator noted that this passage on love is all the more remarkable when we remember what the people around Jesus were about to do to Him. Judas was on his way to betray him. The other disciples were about to abandon him. Within hours, Gentiles and Jews each would have a part in unjustly arresting, abusing, and murdering him as a criminal. We all have a part in the suffering and death of the Lord, for it is for our sin that He suffers so terribly. And yet, He does it because of His love for us. He does not abandon us to the fate we deserve. He doesn’t look at us as unworthy of His goodness. He will love those who need His love. He will love those who don’t deserve His love. He will love, even though His love is often met with unbelief, scorn and bitterness.

The ultimate example of love is seen in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ for us. **Greater love has no one than this, that someone lay down his life for his friends,** Jesus tells us. He died for us and destroyed death and hell for us as He rose again from the dead. He lives to lead us in love–and to help us love one another as He has loved us.

When people get married, they see their wedding day as the great testament of their love for one another. In some cases, it is if everything they feel about love is focussed only on that moment. It is as if we can write one big cheque that buys all the love we need. I think of that woman who said to her husband after 5 years of marriage: “Honey, you never tell me that you love me.” He answered, “I said ‘I love you’ on our wedding day. If I change my mind, I’ll let you know.” But love isn’t about one big cheque to cover the cost. It is found when we write hundreds and thousands of little cheques: \$.89 here; \$.50 here; \$1.25 there. Little acts of love, little sacrifices, everyday expressions of the love we have come to know in Christ–these are the marks of Jesus’ loving friends. These are the marks of that love which we have as we remain in Christ; the daily and steadfast *agape* love, lived out in response to the Gospel.

We, as the branches of the True Vine will bear the fruit of love. Yet we still need to be reminded to **love one another as I have loved you.** We need to learn to love those who are outside of the vine, as Peter did at the home of Cornelius, a Gentile. While good Jews wouldn’t want to fellowship with Gentiles, Peter goes, and through the power of the Holy Spirit learns an important lesson about love: **“Truly I understand that God shows no partiality, but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him.”** (Acts 10:34–35, ESV) Peter learned that if God loved and accepted the Gentiles, then he, a mere man, must love them, too. We need to learn what it is to care for the family of God, as we love one another. We need that love in our hearts, in our homes, in our church, in our world. Thankfully, that love has been made known to us as God loves us and gives us His Son. That love is made known as we are brought into the vine through our Baptism. Living in Him, united in His love, we can indeed go on loving, filled with the joy that His love brings to us. Amen.