

JOHNS CREEK UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

The Power of Love

John 15:9-17

Sunday, May 8, 2022

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A little boy watched, fascinated, as his mother gently rubbed cold cream on her face. “Why are you rubbing cold cream on your face, mommy?” he asked.

“To make myself beautiful,” said his mother.

A few minutes later, she began removing the cream with a tissue. “What’s the matter?” he asked. “Are you giving up?”

Welcome on this Mother’s Day. It’s not easy being a Mom. Those of you who have children know it’s not easy, regardless of their age.

One Mom says that she’s going to try something different this summer with their dog and with their kids. This summer, she says, she’s sending the dog to camp and the kids to obedience school.

Indeed. Someone has said, “The hand that rocks the cradle usually is attached to someone who isn’t getting enough sleep.”

Of course, sometimes it’s not easy having a mom, either. Comedian George Wallace says, “I grew up hearing such stupid things. My mother would say, ‘That’s the last time I’m gonna tell you to take out the garbage.’ Well,” he adds, “thank God.”

Yeah, mom’s aren’t perfect but let’s be honest: Most of us would have been lost without our moms.

A couple was moving across the country. They decided to drive both cars. Their 8-year old son Nathan worried. “How will we keep from getting separated?”

Dad reassured him, “We’ll drive slowly. One car can follow the other.”

“But what if we DO get separated?” Nathan persisted.

“Well, then I guess we’ll never see each other again,” Dad joked.

Nathan quickly answered. “Then I’m riding with Mom.”

Smart kid. Actually, the situation can be summed up in the words of one mom when she said, “I’d like to be the ideal mother, but I’m too busy raising my kids.” Touché!

Our lesson for the day from John’s Gospel is perfect for Mother’s Day because it is about love:

“As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Now remain in my love. If you keep my commands, you will remain in my love, just as I have kept my Father’s commands and remain in his love. I have told you this so that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete. My command is this: Love each other as I have loved you. Greater love has no one than this: to lay down one’s life for one’s friends. You are my friends if you do what I command. I no longer call you servants, because a servant does not know his master’s business. Instead, I have called you friends, for everything that I learned from my Father I have made known to you. You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you so that you might go and bear fruit that will last and so that whatever you ask in my name the Father will give you. This is my command: Love each other.” -John 15:9-17

This passage makes it clear **love is a command**. For Jesus this is not an option. It is non-negotiable. To be a follower of Jesus Christ is to love our families, love our friends, even love our enemies. Jesus said, “By this all men will know that you are my disciples if you love one another” (John 13:35).

Well, there you have it! There aren’t many rules to the Christian faith, but this is a big one. THE big one. We are to love. Of course, this was not the first time Jesus lifted up love as the highest law.

In Matthew’s Gospel an expert in the law tested Jesus with this question:

“Teacher, which is the greatest commandment in the Law?”

Jesus replied: “‘Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.’ This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’ All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments,” Jesus declared (Matthew 22:34-40).

We talk a lot in church about love in a general, abstract sense. But what is it concretely? What does love look like?

Children are the best teachers in this realm. They are wiser than we realize. A group of four-to eight-year-olds were asked the question: “What does love mean?”

Rebecca, age eight, said, “When my grandmother got arthritis, she could not 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.”

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

Chrissy, age six, said, “Love is when you go out to eat and give somebody most of your French fries without making them give you any of theirs.”

Terri, age four, said, “Love is what makes you smile when you are tired.”

Danny, age seven, said, “Love is when Mommy makes coffee for Daddy and she takes a sip before giving it to him, to make sure the taste is okay.”

Bobby, age five, said, “Love is what’s in the room with you at Christmas if you stop opening presents and listen.”

Jenny, age four, said, “There are two kinds of love. Our love and God’s love. But God makes both kinds of them.”

Noelle, age seven, said, “Love is when you tell a guy you like his shirt, then he wears it every day.”

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

Jessica, age six, said, “You really should not say, ‘I love you,’ unless you mean it. But if you mean it, you should say it a lot. People forget.”

Nikka, age six, said, “If you want to learn how to love, you should start with a friend you hate.”

The great preacher Harry Emerson Fosdick once told a true story about the transforming love of Jesus Christ. A young woman lived in war-torn Armenia in the early 1900s. A Turkish soldier chased her and her brother down a dead-end alley. The soldier killed her brother, but she escaped. Later she was captured and put to work in a military hospital as a nurse.

One day the man who had murdered her brother was a patient in the hospital and assigned to her ward. When she recognized him, she was horrified. But he had been critically wounded and she knew that the slightest neglect would cause his death. Suddenly, a very different battle waged within her. One side of her wanted vengeance. She thought, “Here’s my chance. No one will ever know.” But Christ’s Spirit reigned victorious inside her. She nursed him back to health and prayed for him daily.

When the soldier fully recovered, he asked the nurse in amazement, “Why? You recognized me. Why did you care for me so faithfully?” She replied, “Because I serve him who said, ‘Love your enemies and do them good.’ That is my faith.”

The soldier was silent as he reflected on such foreign words. Then he replied, “Tell me more of your religion. Tell me more of your Lord. I would give anything to have a faith like yours!”

Can you imagine? That must’ve been that toughest that woman ever had to do – to love and pray for the man who killed her brother. But that’s what Christian love is. That’s the kind of love Christ gave us when we were undeserving. Love is a command.

But Christian love is also sacrificial. Christ speaks of “laying down one’s life for one’s friends . . .”

For many of us love is a sappy emotion with no substance. “I love you for what you can do for me,” is the basic rule of such love. “You meet my needs and so I have a warm feeling for you.” We sing about such love, but in our hearts we know such love is like cotton candy. It is sweet but it quickly fades without offering substance. True love, Christian love is sacrificial.

Author, speaker and sports enthusiast Pat Williams, in

his book *A Lifetime of Success*, give one of the best examples I know of sacrificial love.

“He tells of attending a very special Atlanta Braves’ baseball home opener on April 8, 1974. It was a night game against the Dodgers and it was a complete sellout. Williams looked around to see that, seated immediately behind him was singer Pearl Bailey. Up at the plate: the immortal Henry Aaron. On the line: Babe Ruth’s record of 714 career home runs. Aaron had tied the record and tonight he was aiming to break it.

“Understand that this was nearly 50 years ago. An African American player was about to topple the great Babe Ruth and a lot of people in the country didn’t like it. Aaron got a lot of mail that year more than 930,000 letters in all, far more than any other person in the country. Most were fan letters but about 100,000 of them were hate letters, some containing death threats.

“Williams says he was on the edge of his seat when Dodgers pitcher Al Downing hurled the ball toward the plate. Aaron swung and connected. The crack of his bat echoed through the stands. The ball was gone. Home run. Babe Ruth’s record was shattered. The ballpark went nuts” (Duncan, “Love Each Other”).

“As Aaron rounded second base,” says Williams, “a couple of teenagers both white jumped over the retaining wall and ran onto the field, chasing Aaron. For a moment, no one knew what they had in mind, but then it became clear: they were celebrating and cheering Aaron on. As Aaron crossed the plate, the dugout emptied as the Braves streamed onto the field to surround him, cheering and whooping it up. But amid all those ballplayers around Aaron was a short, sixty-eight year old black woman. She latched onto Aaron and wouldn’t let go of him.

“Henry Aaron turned and said to her, ‘Mom! What are you doing here?’

“‘Baby,’ said the mother of the new home run king, ‘if they’re gonna get you,’ (thinking of the death threats Aaron had received) ‘they’ve gotta get me first!’”

That is love only a mother could have for her child. “If they’re gonna get you, they’ve gotta get me first!” Every parent worth his or her salt understands. There is nothing that we will not do for our children.

Of course, some of us are at that stage of life when it is our parents who need our sacrificial love. King Duncan writes, “It’s part of the circle of life. Our parents

provided for our needs when we were young, but now it is they who have pressing needs. Who will be there for them? You may be part of what is often referred to as the “sandwich generation,” caught between the needs of your children and the needs of your aging parents. That really is a difficult place.

“A lady named Bev Hulsizer tells about a time years ago when her mother came to visit. Her mother asked Bev to go shopping with her because she needed a new dress. Bev confesses that she is not a patient person, and did not look forward to shopping with her Mom, but they set off for the mall together nonetheless.

“They visited nearly every store that carried ladies’ dresses, and her mother tried on dress after dress, rejecting them all. As the day wore on, Bev grew weary and her mother grew frustrated.

“Finally, at their last stop, her mother tried on a lovely blue three piece dress. The blouse had a bow at the neckline, and as Bev stood in the dressing room with her Mom, she watched as her mother tried, with much difficulty, to tie the bow. Her hands were so badly crippled from arthritis that she couldn’t do it. Immediately, Bev’s impatience gave way to an overwhelming wave of compassion for her Mom. She turned away to try and hide the tears that welled up involuntarily.

“Regaining her composure, she turned back to her mother to tie the bow for her. The dress was beautiful, and her mother bought it. Their shopping trip was over, but the event was etched indelibly in Bev’s memory.

“For the rest of the day, her mind kept returning to that moment in the dressing room and to the vision of her mother’s hands trying to tie that bow. Those loving hands that had fed her, bathed her, dressed her, caressed and comforted her, and, most of all, prayed for her, were now touching her in a most remarkable manner.

“Later in the evening, Bev went to her mother’s room, took her Mom’s hands in her own and kissed them. Then much to her surprise told her Mom that to her they were the most beautiful hands in the world.

“Bev says she’s so grateful that God let her see with

new eyes what a precious, priceless gift a loving, self sacrificing mother is. She prays that someday her own hands, and her heart, will have earned such a beauty of their own.

“Some of you can relate to that simple story. You remember the many loving sacrifices your Mom or your Dad made in your behalf. Now you watch sadly as your parents struggle with aging. Now it’s your turn to make sacrifices” (“Love Each Other). Again, it’s not easy. But just remember the sacrificial love Christ demonstrated for us. Facing the cross wasn’t easy either. But he did it for you and for me.

Love is a command. Love is sacrificial. But do you really think that God would command such sacrifice that was not for our best good? **You see love is the most powerful force in the world.**

In 1st Corinthians 13, the Apostle Paul writes: “These three remain: faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love.”

A colleague of mine loves to tell the story about a woman who was active in his church who had a husband who was an atheist. He would come to worship with her occasionally to support her but he thought faith in God was just a fairy tale. Not long after she became active in the church, her husband was stricken with cancer. She loved him and cared for him as he became weaker and closer to death’s door.

Before he died he received Christ as his Lord and Savior. When he was asked what convinced him to believe in Jesus, his answer was quite surprising. It was not because of a thoughtful sermon he heard or because of an astute theological argument. He said he became a Christian because of the way his wife loved him and cared for him during his battle with cancer. He commented that he always heard about the love of Jesus and thought it was a nice idea. But when he experienced the loving way his wife held him and comforted him even though he didn’t believe, he knew in his heart Jesus’ love was real.

He discovered as sooner or later we all discover the bottom line of life is love. King Duncan writes, “Love is what life is all about. God created this world so that He would have persons He could love. God sent His only begotten Son to die on the cross because of love. When one day we are gathered around God’s throne with all those we love, we will discover that the final payoff for living is love. “These three remain: faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love.”

I am grateful to King Duncan and his message “Love Each Other.” It was a helpful resource for me as I prepared this sermon.



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