

"All You Need Is Love: A Way of Life"
John 13:34-35

We continue this week our focus on the importance of love in our lives. But we know that love is hard to practice in daily life and that we need God's help to be truly loving, especially of those we normally don't love. One of the Super Bowl commercials from last Sunday was especially fun and intriguing. It starts out like many bad jokes do but ends really well. Let's watch it:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zMr_5P-SSWs

While it is funny, it makes us wonder how we might get there. Another example was the opening ceremony of the Winter Olympics this past Friday and how we saw North and South Korea walk in as one team! Such experiences drive us to ask, why can't people love each other across differences? Why so much blood has been shed while using the name of God? How can people who love God get so misguided as to hate and hurt others? Last week, there was an article in the paper titled "A Time to Speak Up Against Slavery's Evil." What was of interest to me is how Presbyterians in our area were on the wrong side of history and of love during that time. According to historical records, in 1849 two churches in our area refused to host abolitionist speakers in their churches because they thought that would have distracted their people from the revivals that were taking place there or because they believed that the speakers would be too controversial for their people. We can look back and feel really sad that this is the way "good" Christians behaved on an issue that was so at the heart of the gospel of Jesus Christ. They allowed fear instead of love to drive their actions. But I wonder if we don't do the same thing today when love is costly and requires us to risk, when the moral and social issues of our day are not yet settled. I know that it is not easy to let the unconditional love of God be our motivation instead of fear.

And so today I want to invite us to consider how God calls us to love as a way of life in the example and way of Jesus. Jesus lived his love for others as a way of life. It was not something that he did when felt like it or when it was appropriate or convenient to do so. He dedicated his life to the way of love and refused to engage in any activities that violated or degraded others. Love for Jesus meant service and a commitment that went beyond the cultural limits of love.

The passage for today was part of the farewell speech by Jesus to his disciples. (Read Passage) But the setting is really important. It took place when Jesus was facing betrayal by Judas. In verse 21 of this chapter in John, Jesus "was troubled in spirit." He had just washed the disciples' feet and had his last meal with them, yet Judas was ready to betray him and sell him out to the Romans. Judas had left the inner circle of the followers of Jesus to commit an act of severe betrayal. Jesus was clearly in pain over this. He had just washed Judas' feet. He humbled himself to the point of being a servant to show love to a man who clearly did not deserve it. Yet, Jesus' actions were not motivated by his fear and pain. He did not let those feelings dominate the scene. Instead, Jesus did two surprising things. First, he gave Judas bread to eat so that the other disciples would not even know what Judas was doing. Second, he asked the disciples to love one another. Think of how radical these acts are in light of what Jesus

was facing. I could think of several options for the way Jesus could have reacted if he was to let fear and anger rule the day. He could have at least made Judas feel guilty. He could have talked about him behind his back after he left to teach the disciples a moral lesson. He could have exposed Judas for the fraud that he was. Instead, Jesus chose to do the next thing with love. Despite his feelings of agitation and pain, Jesus chose to act nonviolently and out of his love. He chose to go with the divine grace which overflowed in his life. His whole lifestyle was that of love and this was just one more way he lived it out! This is the example which Jesus left for us to follow. We are to embrace a lifestyle of courageous and unconditional love, especially in times of fear.

Some of us might dismiss this as something that only Jesus could do. We may use excuses like these. "Well, he was the son of God, he was supernatural. I am only human. How can I compete with the divine?" or "He knew that he had to die and that is why he allowed Judas to do it. This was part of an eternal plan." Or "Jesus was really talking about being nice to people in church, but they have to behave themselves before we love them." But the truth of the matter is that Jesus showed us what it means to be truly human, to be truly alive to the Spirit, and to be truly loving. His commandment to the disciples at that critical moment was to love one another. He commanded them to be defined by love as his community of followers. Love in the face of fear and hatred was going to be their unique mark.

And so as the followers of Jesus we are called to be defined by love ourselves. This love which Jesus calls us to is the radical kind which makes us uncomfortable. It is not the kind of love which comes because we like others or because they are deserving of our love. It is not the kind of love which we give only when things are going well or when we agree with others in our community. The love which Jesus was talking about was radical because it does not come from our normal ways of calculating and behaving. It comes from a deeper source within us. It is the kind of love that stays true even in the face of fear or pain. Even when we are terrified or hurt deeply, this kind of love does not allow such fear or pain to dominate our actions. This kind of love is the measure of our faith.

How do we go about this grand scheme of a lifestyle of love? I say that the answer is maybe simpler than we think. I believe that we can't just set out to do great things to show our love. What we can do is to choose in each moment to examine our thoughts, motivations, words, and actions by the standard of Christ's love. A simple question could be of great power: Am I thinking, saying, or doing the next thing with love?

In his book, *The Great Spiritual Migration*, Brian McLaren challenges Christians to refocus on the primacy of love and to know that love needs to be learned and practiced in order for it to become a lifestyle. He describes his vision for the future of the church this way: "What I believe can and should happen is that tens of thousands of congregations will become what I call schools or studios of love. That's the desired future to which I am passionately committed. I'm not concerned about a congregation's denomination, musical style, or liturgical taste; I don't care if they meet weekly in a cathedral, monthly in a bar, annually at a retreat center, or daily online. I don't care whether they are big or small, formal or casual, hip or unhip, or whether their style of

worship is traditional or contemporary or whatever. What I care about is whether they are teaching people to live a life of love, from the heart, for God, for all people no exceptions, and for all creation. These churches would aim to take people at every age and ability level and help them become the most loving version of themselves possible. They would help people face the challenges of life – challenges that could make them bitter, self-absorbed, callous, or hateful – with openness, courage, and generosity. They would help people recognize when they are straying from the way of love and help them get back on the path.”

I have heard it said that many Christians are informed but not transformed, meaning they know about God, Jesus, and the teachings, but they have not allowed the love of God to transform them because they have not learned the practices of prayer and life that make for transformation into the way of love.

As people of Christ way of love, we talked last year about how we define the path of discipleship. We realized that even though we each have our own individual journey, there is a common path for faith to continue to grow. (put discipleship path on screen).



The four elements for this school of God’s love are: connect, serve, worship, and grow. You can participate in one or two of these activities, but in order to really mature in your relationship with God, the four elements are essential and work together. In the movie the Karate Kid, the young student wanted to learn Kung Fu and was anxious to get the skills right away. He was disappointed when the teacher told him to just practice putting on and taking off his jacket. It seemed so pointless and so repetitive that it had no real value or result. It was going nowhere. But the teacher then challenges him to see that because of the practice, he was building up his muscles and his focus. The power of practice was it was daily and repetitive. Show clip:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=T10ycFr770g>

The same is true of our prayers and practice of faith in daily life. Worship, Bible reading, prayer, serving others, giving of ourselves sharing with friends about faith are all essential for us to get to those places when it becomes natural for us to just love.

So today I would like to invite us to take a few moments in reflection and prayer to see where God is calling you to grow on that path. Maybe you are naturally drawn to service but have a hard time with personal time in prayer, or maybe the opposite is true for you. Take an honest inventory of your current spiritual life and see where you need to grow. Let God speak to you on where you need to grow. Don't force this or try to come up with something out of guilt. Instead, let your longing for God guide you. (have music playing in the background). (Roula will close in prayer) Amen.

DISCIPLESHIP PATH INVENTORY & PRAYER CARD

1. Grow: Our daily intentional time with God as the focus in prayer or reading the Bible.
2. Worship: Coming together with others to pray and to open ourselves to experiencing God's loving presence. Weekly communal worship that engages hearts, minds, bodies, and senses.
3. Connect: Gathering with others for faith sharing, prayer, support, friendship, and study.
4. Serve: Putting our faith into action in daily life to join the mission of Christ in the world. Sharing the good news of Christ's love with others. Giving of our time and finances.