

St. Mark's Episcopal Church
Albuquerque, New Mexico
Sunday May 18, 2025
Text: John 13: 35-41
Theme: Learning to Love in Community.

There is a parishioner who sometimes reminds me that we need to hear sermons about love but that we don't need Jesus loves us 101. We need to hear about love at a depth, we need to be stirred to love and be loved. We need to know about the demands of love, the fierceness of love, the mystery and power of love at the center of faith. It's a tall order but one that each of us longs for and the very thing that the life and teaching of Jesus is centered upon.

It is also clear that we need a modicum of vitality for what simply being alive in this time asks of us. We are in a vulnerable place as we face an assault on our most treasured values and way of life in this time. As we look around our nation and our lives we see things being stripped away that we thought were unassailable. The very ideals that we thought defined us as citizens of this world seem to be undermined and questioned whether it is the commitment to long-time allies and friends, freedom of speech, intellectual inquiry, the value of science or even the foundational belief in due process. All around us there are reasons for despair and anxiety and we need to be able to talk about these things. But more than that we need a faith and a way of life that leads us to hope for the future, to care for those around us, to believe that light is stronger than darkness, to know that the way of love is the way to life.

We are surrounded by an information environment which is profoundly negative and this stokes our fears and anxiety that can lead us to feel that everything is broken. We know that this is not actually true but it is hard to escape the sheer force of our media cycles and doomsaying. What we need is constant reminders of who we are and to whom we belong.

Fundamentally we are children of God, beloved and of great worth. We need to find connection and value in the relationships that surround us. We need to experience the wonder of creation and find delight in the natural world.

The truth is that we are wired for connection with one another. We find our true meaning and purpose in giving and receiving love and it is so important that we remind each other of this, that we pay attention to our sacred story about God's overwhelming love for us and that we encourage one another to live out of that love. This human connection is the most powerful antidote to the loneliness and anxiety and fear that are infecting our who society top to bottom. Recently I read that over half of Americans are lonely and that the numbers are highest among younger people. We've just come through the most catastrophic decade of loneliness for our society as we've attached ourselves and our children to screens instead of to meaningful relationships and the wonder of being alive in the natural world. Everywhere you go you can see people sitting in groups glued to their devices but desperately lonely. I've come to realize that every time with gather for worship, to remember our defining story, to sing together the powerful music of our tradition, to remember our ancestors in the faith,

and to celebrate around the sacred table of the Eucharist, we are actually doing something very radical, very subversive, very wise, and very beautiful. We are reminding each other of the story of God's overwhelming love at the center of our lives and smuggling into our very lives the dangerous story of love and belonging that makes all the difference.

In the Gospel reading today, it is clear that Jesus' death is the supreme act of love for his disciples. In the John's Gospel "The good shepherd lays down his life for his sheep. (John 10:15) The way that Jesus lays down his life creates something new, as in fact all true sacrifices do. What is new? The way Jesus lived and the way Jesus died creates what the New Testament writer calls a new commandment. **The death of Jesus is not the end of the story, rather it is the beginning of something new, of a new way of loving, a new way of living.** As the saying goes, there are some defeats that are more glorious than victories. This is the case in the death of Jesus. His death, his embrace of the cross creates something new that we are bidden to follow.

In John's Gospel the emphasis is a bit different and it bears close examination. As one theologian said, "The towering insight of Johannean theology is that God first loved us." We love because God has first loved us (I John 4:19) This loving of God of course is made most clear in the human person of Jesus who lays down his life for his friends. We know of God's loving us first because of the love that was poured out onto the disciples by Jesus. The New Commandment is to be like Jesus, to love

like he loves. The first step in the new commandment is to become aware of the fact that Jesus joined us at the depth of our humanity, he entered the same dark waters that you and I share. The more we get to know Christ, the more we realize that Christ is with us in our deepest fears, our most shattering losses, in the times where we are not sure what it is that sustains us if not the presence of God in our lives.

It's important to think deeply about the nature of love and loving for it is so important to our own thriving and to human thriving in general. The writer James Mackey writes these words that I find quite moving about the dynamics of our human endeavor to love.

I simply will not feel my own life, my own self, as grace or gift from God, unless someone values me... I may see, at first blush, that this stands the whole logic of the reign of God on its head... The logic should surely read: first feel all life and existence as grace and then feel inspired to be gracious to others. Not, first feel the grace of some human presence, feel forgiven, accepted, served, then begin to feel all life and existence as grace, and then feel inspired to be gracious to others. But it is really a universal human idiosyncrasy that is operative here, not a matter of logic... [Most of us] can only sense ourselves and our world valued and cherished by God when we feel valued and cherished by others. (Jesus: the Man and the Myth [Mahway, NJ: Paulist Press, 1979] 170)

Maybe this seems obvious to you, but I found it stunning. The simple truth is this, the way people come to know and love God is through the human. It is, I admit a paradox. It is a paradox that grounds the new commandment to love one another. Our loving of one another is essential if each of us is to know the love of God. It reminds us that we are social creatures, we really do need each other, we really do serve each other, we really are helping each other toward the kingdom of God in the everyday acts of love, in our risk to forgive one another, our efforts to serve each other, in our listening to one another, in our working through the hard moments in our lives when we are tempted to be less than our best selves and run away or wound.

We share a collective responsibility to one another to give and receive love. Jesus makes it clear that we have a responsibility to one another, “I give you a new commandment that you love one another as I have loved you.”

This description of how people come to know the love of God through their ongoing connection to people who love them is powerful for me. I look back on the many people who loved me and who loved God and it is not an accident that I found my way into the community of faith. I remember my Sunday School teacher who snuck his small TV into Sunday School on week so we didn't miss an important playoff game but we had to keep the volume low so that we didn't get into trouble. I remember the youth leaders who listened to me, who handled my energy and embraced me, and who did me the honor of not only telling me about Jesus but of being like Jesus in my life.

Their wisdom and love and mentoring were life-shaping for me and I give thanks for that self-giving love that I did not earn but benefited from immeasurably.

One of our key tasks is to be a community that holds at its center a dangerous memory of Jesus who was willing to lay down his life for his friends. Each week we gather here and tell the story again and again. We persevere in this memory and what is more we endeavor to enact that same kind of self-giving love toward each other. It is a love that is not rooted in our own capacity to love first, but rather in the fact that we have been loved first, that God in Christ demonstrated his great love for us.

We are to love each other just as Jesus loved his disciples. That is the charge and the challenge. And if you have been around the church for any real length of time you realize what a tall order it actually is, to love as Jesus loved. It is not all that difficult to listen to your friends most of the time. It may be a bit harder to ask their forgiveness when you've hurt them but that is usually manageable as well, it is important to stick close to them when they are going through difficult and troubling times. But the Church asks us to do that not just for our friends but for those with whom we worship, with those who we are being made into a community with and that is a rather tall order no matter how well your mama trained you. It is only possible by the grace of God, active in our lives and through the constant reminder of our dangerous memory of Christ's love.

The Christian community is a participatory endeavor, we hear the story of Jesus at the same time we watch and participate in the way of life that the story engenders and encourages.

What we hope for is some coherence between the story we are learning and the way we are living. I recently heard a story from another pastor that goes right to this point. His church has been talking about how much they wanted children in their congregation and how they would love to have young families worshiping with them. One Sunday morning a young family with a child visited the church. They sat toward the back knowing that they might need to slip out to quiet the baby during the service. At one point in the service the baby started to fuss a little and the father stood up to try to settle the child a bit, to move around and see if they would quiet down. But before he could do anything to settle the child 4 or 5 people turned around and gave him the stink-eye. There were no smiles or offers of help or whispers of “don’t worry we love kids and we’re glad you’re here.” Sadly the family made their way out to the entrance to quiet their child and never returned. Living out the story of radical welcome is difficult and uncomfortable at times. It requires hard work and sacrifice and a willingness to give up on perfection and to love the people who are right in front of us.

When we say we are building something beautiful for God in our neighborhood we are doing something mysterious and wonderful. We are choosing to belong to a community that carries the tradition and memory of Jesus through time and space so that we too can access this story for our own lives. We

are hanging around a group of people who are in their faltering and fumbling ways trying to live out the reality of God's love as well.

When we hurt each other or get into conflict, we ask forgiveness, talk about it, confess it and try to get a new start. When we fail one another, we acknowledge it but don't hold it against each other for the next 50 years or cut-off the relationship. When we have troubles in our lives, we share them so that others can help us carry the burden. When we are hurting, we let others comfort us and hold us up in prayer. When we are in crisis or recovering, we allow the community to help in ways that they can, driving us to dr. appointments, bringing us meals, and keeping our spirits up. When we have children, we look to the community to help us shape and raise them into Christian human beings so that they too may know the joy and wonder of life with God. When something beautiful happens in our life we give thanks and share our joy with others who know the Risen One as well.

Ending Reflection

Place your right hand over your heart

Think about the people who have loved you over the years. The people who have been there for you through difficult times. Who have supported you without judging you and who have stood by your side even when it was hard.

Think about the people who have celebrated your moments of greatest joy with you. The people who saw your successes as theirs. The people who have derived such pleasure and fulfillment from seeing you happy feel their love flowing through you lifting you up brightening your mood and filling your heart and know that their love is always there even if they are no longer with you because you carry that love in your heart and know that you are and always will be worthy of that love because it came to you as gift as grace.

We are all worthy of love and connection even in those moments that we are struggling. The truth is we are not alone. We live in a world that is powered by love We only have to see it, name it and start taking actions in our lives. When you stand in strength of love you allow others to find you and every time you act out of love you are telling people around you that it is ok to give and receive love as well. When you stand in the strength of love you are inspiring people to be part of Jesus' new way of being in the world. Small acts of love are radical acts of defiance and they are the force that we need to build the world we desire and that God desires.

Let St. Mark's be a community who knows the love of God in our loving of one another. Let us be a community that others experience and say, look how much they love one another, look

at how much they care for each other, look how the love of Jesus is poured out into the world through them.

Note: I want to acknowledge the influence of an interview I heard with the former Surgeon General, Vivek Murthy who led a similar meditation about love that I have adapted here in this sermon.