

# Sermons at Union Congregational Church

Preached by The Reverend Gail L. Miller, Pastor

May 6, 2018

Sixth Sunday of Easter

John 15:9-16

## **LOVE EACH OTHER!**

*Prayer: O Lord, you have taught us that without love, whatever we do is worth nothing. Send now your Holy Spirit and pour into our hearts this greatest of your gifts. In Jesus' name. Amen.*

*O Tell Me The Truth About Love - by WH Auden*

Some say love's a little boy,  
And some say it's a bird,  
Some say it makes the world go round,  
Some say that's absurd,  
And when I asked the man next door,  
Who looked as if he knew,  
His wife got very cross indeed,  
And said it wouldn't do.  
Does it look like a pair of pyjamas,  
Or the ham in a temperance hotel?  
Does its odour remind one of llamas,  
Or has it a comforting smell?  
Is it prickly to touch as a hedge is,  
Or soft as eiderdown fluff?  
Is it sharp or quite smooth at the edges?  
O tell me the truth about love.  
Our history books refer to it  
In cryptic little notes,  
It's quite a common topic on  
The Transatlantic boats;  
I've found the subject mentioned in  
Accounts of suicides,  
And even seen it scribbled on  
The backs of railway guides.  
Does it howl like a hungry Alsatian,  
Or boom like a military band?  
Could one give a first-rate imitation  
On a saw or a Steinway Grand?  
Is its singing at parties a riot?  
Does it only like Classical stuff?  
Will it stop when one wants to be quiet?  
O tell me the truth about love.  
When it comes, will it come without warning  
Just as I'm picking my nose?  
Will it knock on my door in the morning,  
Or tread in the bus on my toes?  
Will it come like a change in the weather?  
Will its greeting be courteous or rough?  
Will it alter my life altogether?  
O tell me the truth about love.

The poet Auden wanted to know the truth about love. And love is the number one theme of the Bible.

The ancient Greeks had several ways of expressing the English word love. They spoke of *philia*, which is perhaps best translated as friendship or brotherly love (Philadelphia). They also spoke of *eros*, which is erotic love – intense and often including sexual desire. Then there is a third word for which, interestingly enough, there seems to be no English equivalent – this called “agape.” And by this they meant a quality of love that continues to give of itself even when no love is returned – a kind of love that is completely self-sacrificing.

Whenever we might encounter love like this, it can be humbling because we know not just how rare it is, but also because it is perhaps as close to God as we’re likely to get in this life.

The Bible says that without love whatever we do is worth nothing. According to the Apostle Paul love - agape love - is set apart as the greatest of Christian virtues.

Love, he says, is the virtue that will effect change the most. It is possible to have great wisdom. It is possible to have a devout spirituality and a deep level of faith. But Paul also recognized that every one of those gifts, no matter how genuinely held and practiced, can essentially be cold and sterile and lifeless without the life-giving and life transforming element of love.

The short section we read from the gospel of John is from a long four chapters of Jesus’ last words to his disciples before he dies. And in them, he emphasized the importance of love. And in those days, this was a new way of thinking about God and about religion and faith. God is not power or a judge or even omnipotent, but love. Elsewhere, John writes that God IS love. He’s saying, that to act lovingly is to act Godly and those who abide in love abide in God.

“This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you.” And in telling them that, Jesus is also telling them, and us, that to love in such a way is a choice. God only knows that more often than not we choose not to love – we choose to do what is easy and expedient, or we only invest in relationships that promise to give us something substantial in return.

But in choosing to love, we are saying that in spite of what this relationship is going to cost me – in spite of the fact that from time to time I may get hurt along the way, I am going to love you anyway. Far more than it is an emotion or a feeling, love is a choice.

“You did not choose me, I chose you,” Jesus said.

In the French Reformed Church when a baby is being baptized they do the usual things – say a few words about what baptism is and what it means – then the parents hand the baby to the pastor, but before putting the water on and saying, “I baptize you...,” the pastor speaks directly to the baby, calling them by name and saying,

*It was for you that Jesus Christ came down into the world, struggled and suffered;  
for you he endured the agony of Gethsemane and the darkness of Calvary;  
for you he cried, “It is finished,”  
for you he died and for you he conquered death;  
yes for you, little one, you who know nothing of it as yet.  
Thus the Apostle’s words are confirmed, “We love God because God first loved us.”*

You did not choose me, I chose you. Love one another as I have loved you. And notice that Jesus didn’t tell us that we had to like one another. He said we have to LOVE one another which, in a strange way, may actually be easier than liking one another. Perhaps because there is something deep within us that allows us to do what is commanded of us, which isn’t necessarily to like but to love one another.

Here’s a story that shows what love, sacrificial, agape love looks like.

*An eight year old boy had a younger sister who was dying of Leukemia, and he was told that without a blood transfusion she would die. His parents explained to him that his blood was probably compatible with hers, and if so, he could be the blood donor. They asked him if they could test his blood. He said sure. So they did and it was a good match.*

*Then they asked if he would give his sister a pint of his blood – that it would be her only chance of living. He said he would have to think about it overnight. The next day he went to his parents and said he was willing to donate the blood. So they took him to the hospital where he was put on a gurney beside his six year old sister. Both of them were hooked up to IV's. A nurse withdrew a pint of blood from the boy, which was then put into the girl's IV. The boy lay on his gurney in silence while the blood dripped into his sister.*

*Soon the doctor came over to see how he was doing. The boy opened his eyes and asked, "How soon until I start to die?"*

"Love one another as I have loved you."

No one has greater love than this, "Jesus told them, "than to lay down one's life for one's friends."

The great Bible scholar Father Raymond Brown suggests that the deeper you go into this message, the more the words love and life become interchangeable. He says, "One of the distinguishing characteristics of Christianity is here, in the example of giving life away."

Jesus desperately wanted those disciples to believe what he had come to believe himself, namely that the whole creation was full of God's love and that human beings offer the best and fullest expressions of that love in terms of how we treat others. And further, that the entire purpose of the religious enterprise is to acknowledge our gratitude to God for the gracious love He has showered upon us, and to show that gratitude by simply loving others in the same way that God has loved us in Jesus Christ.

So, if you want to save your life, you must in some way lose your life.

If you want to be happy, forget about your own happiness and start working for someone else's.

If you want to experience joy and fulfillment and meaning in your life, find a way to pour your life out.

Some of the things Jesus says are difficult to understand – they need some unpacking before we really know what he's asking of us. Or they need to be put into their cultural context to better understand his intent. However, this passage is NOT one of those – it's as clear and simple as it sounds – "Love one another as I have loved you."

Remember this comes from the one who chose us long before we ever existed.

And it's a promise that the one who loved us in Jesus loves us still, holds us always, provides for our every need, and never stops reminding us that we always, always belong.

Amen.