

Love One Another

The Rev. Paige F. Fisher
Trinity Church in the City of Boston
Sixth Sunday of Easter
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In the name of our Creator, Redeemer and Sustainer. Amen.

Love. This is a word that seems to have lost a bit of its punch in our world today. We love french fries, we love a movie, we are in love with the movie star that's in the movie, we love to hike, we love our iPods and oh yes, the cell phones. I do love my cell phone. We love gardening; we love our Red Sox and on and on it goes. We throw around the word love like we pull tissues from a box, without any thoughts about what we are really doing or saying. In the same sentence of proclaiming you love a new CD, you might also tell your spouse that you love them. Is it the same type of love? Probably not - I hope not!

One thing that does seem to flow from all these statements of love that get thrown around, is an attachment to positive emotion or feeling. If we say we love broccoli we aren't claiming that we don't actually like the taste of it but we eat it anyway, we are saying we enjoy the taste of it, we have a positive feeling when we eat it, and we like it. It's a good thing.

However, here we are this morning being commanded by Jesus to love one another as I have loved you. What is it that is being asked of us? What does it mean to love as Jesus loved? How did He love? How is it different from loving the cell phone, the Red Sox and broccoli? Well, Jesus' love definitely moved beyond warm and fuzzy feelings. Jesus showed us love for difficult people who were certainly not the beloved during their time. It was a bit of a different understanding of what it meant to be loving. Again and again throughout scripture Jesus showed us a different perspective. The perspective of the outsider, the outcast, the prostitute, the tax collector, those who were scared and angry and self-righteous, all those who were sinners and He continually called us to see things from a different angle. In telling their stories we were able to see the complexities of a prostitute or a tax collector. They were not merely the warts of society but humans struggling to be accepted and understood.

Jesus, through each of those encounters, taught us to not only see the humanity of each of these outsiders, but to welcome them into the fold of the community and to even care for them. Jesus showed us through His example, the importance of having compassion for those in the larger community who might be considered unlovable and unworthy of God's love and our love. And Jesus said, no, you are worthy, you are more than worthy.

I so often hear people talk in religious circles about love not being a feeling but being about action. Trying to move away from that idea of the love of whatever feels good, we talk more about action, how we behave and what we do is considered far more important than our feelings toward another person. To love as Jesus loved isn't about a warm mushy feeling, it's about how we meet our neighbor. Jesus gave us the example of loving

even those who challenge us. Yes, our actions are exactly how we show people we love them and our actions may or may not have warm fuzzy feelings behind them. We might even be seething underneath it all. But you know I wonder if God isn't possibly asking something more of us. Maybe by acting kind towards others we are saying that we can have hostile feelings toward someone, but as long as we aren't mean to them then its ok and we are being loving as Jesus commanded.

However, I would argue that God does want us to fell love towards others and not to just act, but to see the Christ in them so that we might actually have feelings of sympathy and that we may truly be able to know love towards that person. That we might move from actions grounded in responsibility and duty and move to actions grounded in compassion. Compassion is different from tolerating someone you don't like. Compassion is a willingness to try and walk in someone else's shoes if even for just a moment. To sit in someone else's pain, to try and find the good news in their heart and to find the holy that's moving in them. This, to me, asks something far greater than just action. It asks us to seek the goodness in those people we struggle to see it in the most.

Oftentimes people pride themselves on the important work that they are doing for the needy and the less fortunate and they feel this genuine, sincere compassion towards those who can't help themselves. Yet, in the very same breath they are repulsed by privilege and the people who seem blind to the suffering around them. The challenge, I believe Jesus' command to love one another, puts before this person or these people or us, is the need to find a way to understand and reach out to even those people that are frustrating and possibly self-absorbed. What is it, maybe if we put ourselves in their shoes, what is it that keeps these from focusing on those who are suffering? What fears or reservations might keep them from being open to being present to people in need? What would be some ways to invite those people into opportunities of service for others?

If you try to step there, you can maybe understand for a moment what that person is experiencing, what their reservations might be, why they're distracted and focused in other places. When we find ways to be more compassionate with more sincerity big things happen. To love someone is to see through that prickly exterior and to take the time to look beneath or around the obstacles that keep us from feeling that compassion. When we are able to do that, when we are able to show compassion towards those who don't think like us, or look at the world like us, who don't meet us with joy and enthusiasm. When we are able to give love or compassion towards them, we show these people the goodness in them, the goodness in their own hearts. And when we are able to do that something not only happens to us because we are able to open our hearts in ways that we never imagined, to see things from perspectives we never imagined; but oftentimes something happens in them because you have been able, we've been able to find the God in them, to find the Christ in them, to unlock that. That's when transformation can happen. To be loved for who you are, not despite who you are, is when transformation occurs.

I love the movie, Dead Man Walking that came out several years ago. It's the true story of a Sister, Sister Helen Perjean, who goes and works with those who are imprisoned, in

particular those who are on Death Row. In the film you follow her work and her time with one particular inmate by the name of Matthew who is in prison for multiple murders, possibly, in particular a young girl. As she sits with this man, week in and week out, this story shows us the utmost of compassion. In the most horrific of people, she finds goodness and she finds hope, and she offers forgiveness and gives this inmate the opportunity to ask for forgiveness. She says to him as he is going towards Death Row, the day of his death; "Matthew I want that last face you see in this world to be the face of love, so you look at me when they do this thing and I'll be the face of love for you." What an amazing story and she does this over and over again.

But all of us have this gift and have this capacity to love the darkest of people and to find the light in the darkest of personalities. And that's what it means, what I believe this text is saying to us today, to love one another as I have loved you. To love one another with the same type of unconditional love, to love one another in brokenness, to love one another in celebration and in pain, and to look inside, to give space and to ask questions. To step for a moment in someone else's shoes so you might be able to see things a little differently. That is the gift that we are given when we are able to love one another, when we are able to be Christ to one another and see Christ in each other. So may we take this passage and this good news and this one more time to be told to go out and to love as we have been loved; and see it as not merely just behavioral, but see it as something that changes inside of us, in each of our hearts, that allows us to love more fully and more authentically and with more genuine care. To risk. Amen.