

“Love... As I Have Loved You”  
Psalm 98:1-9; Acts 10:44-48;  
John 15:9-17

May 6, 2018  
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Today we celebrate the 6<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Easter. We celebrate an empty tomb, and we celebrate the way that God loved us. He loved us beyond our understanding when he gave us his son to die on the cross, and then to give us the promise of everlasting life. Yes, this is the 6<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Easter, and he is risen. He is risen indeed.

The word “love” instantly takes us to our most intimate and tender places. It brings us to people that we care about most, and to people who are present in our lives and those who have passed away. It also brings us to people who are difficult to love. Love is the source of some of our most wonderful moments and our greatest pain. If we are fortunate, we have deeply experienced both. These are not phrases from a greeting card, but expressions of the great gift that we have been given: the capacity to love and be loved.

David Brooks is one of my favorite political commentators. He appears on the PBS News Hour every Friday evening, and he is a columnist who writes for the New York Times. He is conservative leaning and has a world view in which values, faith, character, and integrity matter. Recently he gave a guest sermon at the National Cathedral in Washington D.C. where he talked about the importance of living a life of integrity guided by faith. During that sermon he said Christians are expected to live lives beyond the 10 Commandments, and that we are expected to live more complicated lives into the two Great Commandments. Following the Ten Commandments isn't enough. Instead, we are called to follow the two Great Commandments of loving God with all of our heart and loving our neighbors as ourselves. These two commandments are incredibly harder than living a life of the Ten Commandments.

In our Gospel reading today, there are two parts that I would like to focus on. First is the part of the scripture where we are told that we are supposed to love one another as God loves us. Not just love one another, but love one another as God has loved us. The other part is that he has chosen us. He has chosen to love us and because he has chosen to love us, he's admonishing us that we also must choose love. We must love other people. We must love other people sometimes when it's difficult. But he chose us first, and so our work is fairly clear. There are a lot of other potential sermons in the Gospel passage that I read, but those are the two points that I would like to spend time with today.

Some days, in fact, I expect it's not necessarily easy for God to love me, but I'm overwhelmed by the knowledge that I am loved no matter what. Have you had bad days, weeks, or even years when you have travelled paths that made you feel separated from God, and yet you come back to the place where you know that God loves you? It's hard to understand how we can be loved so unconditionally, but he loves us patiently, persistently, no matter what. God loves me when I act like I don't need him. God loves me when I'm angry at him. God loves me when it seems like he

does not answer my prayers. God loves me when I treat my day like a big selfie and I leave God out of the picture. God loves me when I've accidentally or intentionally harmed someone else. God loves me by forgiving me.

God also loves me by giving me love lessons. He's given me many love lessons through the parables. Have you noticed during Jesus' ministry that his sermons don't start with a sermon? His sermon is always an act of love. Have you noticed in the parables that he heals first, and then preaches? Or he gives food, and then preaches? He gives comfort, and then preaches? It's unconditional. He gives love without saying, "...and the conditions for this love are that you need to do X, Y, and Z." But he starts by giving love.

In these parables, he teaches me that love means not judging, but being the giver of second chances and not joining the crowd that throws stones. He tells me that by loving my neighbor and the least of these, I'm loving him. He shows me how the Samaritan loves a stranger and how I must, also. He teaches me that reconciliation is a profound act of love when the Prodigal is welcomed home. He tells me that even if I come late to the field as a laborer, and other workers have already been there, I am still loved. He loves me like the Good Shepherd. He will seek to bring me back to the flock when I'm lost. He even tells me that I can't buy his love with money or good works. In fact, I need to forsake those things so that I can love him more fully. These are the ways that God tells me that I'm loved and how I need to love others.

He also has said, "I have chosen you. I've chosen to love you no matter what. I have asked you to be my friend, not a servant. I've asked you to be my friend, not part of my staff. But I've asked you to be my friend. I've chosen you to bear fruit and do my work to love others."

We have been urged to love even when to love means loving someone who is hard to love. We have people in our lives who are sometimes hard to love. That person may be a relative, a neighbor, or a co-worker. They may be hard to love because they have hurt us in the past or are hurting us now. They may be hard to love because of something that happened a long time ago, and we don't even remember what the issue was, but they are still hard to love.

When I was thinking about this, I had a humbling thought. That thought was, "I wonder if some people find me hard to love?" It's easy for me to project and think about the people that I find hard to love, but I needed to ask that question, "Am I that person who is hard to love? Have I caused somebody else's pain?"

For example, living in a family is a remarkable laboratory for living in the world. Living in a family is sometimes the hardest place to show love, grace, and forgiveness. Some of our greatest joys and our greatest pain come from living in our families of birth, or our families of choice like neighborhoods and faith communities, but also in our families. This is especially hard because we also want to be loved.

Many years ago, Kathy and I recognized that we had some different political views and faith perspectives from some of our other family members. After some difficult

family gatherings, we realized that we needed to set aside those differences and choose to love them for the things that we had in common. It was up to us. It was up to us because it was our choice, sometimes, to decide to have hard conversations and disagree about certain things. It was up to us, and we realized that if we didn't focus on what we had in common and choose to love that, quite frankly, the family ceremonies of weddings and funerals would just be that—ceremonies. We had to choose to love and we had to focus on the things that were more important than our differences. Sometimes that's not easy.

In this season of hyper-political, polarizing, crass, and mean discourse I am trying to find ways to love without betraying my own values. I feel deeply about many issues, and yet I know I have a choice. I can join in the acrimony or I can seek ways of addressing my concerns through acts of love, civil debate, and service. Again, it's not easy. In fact, it's far easier to define those that I disagree with as my enemy. Even though Jesus says, "Love thy enemy," it's still hard.

Jesus' love pushes me to a harder path, in some ways, because it's easier to judge, easier to demonize and categorize. It's easier because I feel like I've done my work. The problem is somebody else, and all I have to do is be angry. The other person needs to change, not me. That's the easy way, but not necessarily the right one.

So how do I engage in loving those who I deeply dislike without betraying my own values? Sometimes I simply don't know. But with God's help I know that I have choices and that I must try.

Many years ago, President Lyndon Johnson once summoned the segregationist George Wallace to his office to try to convince Governor Wallace that he needed to be a force in desegregation even though Governor Wallace was a staunch segregationist. LBJ said to Wallace, "George, what do you want on your tomb stone? It can either be 'He Hated' or 'He Built.' George, you have a choice."

Earlier this week, Mary Read shared a post on Facebook that was a post from a person by the name of Robert Cottrell. It's a good ending for today's message. He says, "Every time we love and include someone we have previously judged and excluded, we get a little closer to experiencing the fullness of God's radical love for us."

So God loves us and expects us to love others as he has generously loved us. He expects us to choose love even when it seems difficult. He even expects us to do the hardest form of love, and that is to forgive others. There are days when I'm overwhelmed by his love, and there are other days when I seek his love but do not sense it. There are days when I'm so overwhelmed by the need to love others who I find hard to love, but I'm also grateful that his love is there even when I don't feel it because that's when I need it most.

Communion reminds us that God loves us no matter what. Today we come to the table to celebrate God's incredible gift of love to us. We come to celebrate what we have in common and we also come to the table with our own hurts and our need to be loved. Thanks be to God.