

*Sixth Sunday of Easter*

May 6, 2018

Sermon by Pastor Cindy Bullock

The Holy Gospel according to Saint John. (John 15: 9-17)

[Jesus said:] “As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love. If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father’s commandments and abide in his love. I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete.

“This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. No one has greater love than this, to lay down one’s life for one’s friends. You are my friends if you do what I command you. I do not call you servants any longer, because the servant does not know what the master is doing; but I have called you friends, because I have made known to you everything that I have heard from my Father. You did not choose me but I chose you. And I appointed you to go and bear fruit, fruit that will last, so that the Father will give you whatever you ask him in my name. I am giving you these commands so that you may love one another.”

The Gospel of our Lord.

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

So, we’ve had a lot of babies appearing around here lately. Last week, when Pastor Tiede was visiting, she said, “You guys have a lot of kids at this late service!” Chris Cherwien, our music director, is in California this week, with her second grandchild, who was just born a week ago. Baby Palooza reached out to some three-dozen families with infants and toddlers.

So, in honor of all the kids, today I want you to image that you are a little one, two, three years old. You can do this. I know you can. It’s bedtime, and mom or dad come to you to tuck you in; to make sure you’re comfy and secure, and say a prayer with you. They give you a kiss on the forehead, and say, “I love you.” “I love you.” What does that mean? Does it mean, “I will take care of you?” “I will help you grow?” Or, let’s say it’s morning. It’s one of those mornings, when you’re just hoping everybody gets out of the house with clothes on. You have the lunches made. You pick up a stray tennis shoe in the middle of the hall. You tell the kids for at least the thousandth time that they are about to miss the bus. And say to your partner, “So, I pick up the kids. You make sure there is dinner on the table. We have to be at the ball field by six. All right? See you then. Love you.”

“I love you.” What does that mean? Does it mean we can help each other?” Does it mean, “We’ve got this?” Or you’re sitting by someone’s hospital bed. They are not conscious, and you’re not sure they ever will be again. You’re scared. You’ve run out of things to say. You are silent for a while. You hold their hand and you say the most powerful thing you can think to say: “I love you.” “I love you”? Does that mean I want the best for you? It’s breaking my heart to see you like this? What does it mean to say, “I love you”?

Love is a powerful thing. It can give life and hope. It can be a foundation for trust, and honesty, and sacrifice. It can build a family, or a nation, where all people are honored and cared for. There is power in love, connection in love.

But there is also a dark side. Love can be betrayed. It can wound. Love can be used to manipulate or demean. It can leave you grieving. Love is fragile.

In the midst of busy lives and stressed families, in the midst of a changing culture and questions about what is appropriate, in the midst of our doubts and fears about what will happen next, what does it mean to say, “I love you”? How do we deal in love with difficult people and issues? How do we love when we have been hurt? How do we honor our families and still love those outside our families? This is the basic question of who we are as Christians. How do we love?

In today’s Gospel, the word “love” appears nine times. It is clear that Jesus has something to say about loving one another. He’s speaking at the Last Supper to a group of frightened disciples. And I guarantee, love is the last thing on their minds. They’re thinking survival. They are worried about arrest and torture and death. But Jesus brings them back to what is essential. The one thing that is so basic, so essential to the kingdom of God, that Jesus repeats it over and over. Nine times in eight verses. He is pounding it into them. “Listen to this. This is core. This is everything.” “*As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love.*” “*Abide in my love.*”

Last week, Pastor Tiede talked about abide as the car-seat verb. You don’t have to do anything. You just stay there. You rest there. Abide in God’s love. That is the first, central, core tenant of our faith. We are loved without having to do anything. We are loved. Jesus loves us. That’s something we can never hear enough of. You are loved completely and honestly and always. “*I have loved you,*” Jesus said. Maybe just stop there. “I am loved.”

You are loved, you are precious, you are worthy, you are chosen. “*You did not choose me but I chose you,*” Jesus said. You are loved. And we can’t go any further in this space until we get that. Until we have that foundation, until you can trust that God loves you, every piece of you, until you are sure of that, the sermon stops there. We can’t take the next step.

Jesus loves us. And only after we're sure of that, the command can be given. "*This is my commandment, that you love one another, as I have loved you.*" There it is again – "*as I have loved you.*" You need to be loved first and then love one another.

I say this because we have such a wonderful tendency to forget, to forget that we are loved. We have a tendency to change "I am empowered by love" to "I'm supposed to." I'm supposed to be nice to people that drive me crazy. I'm supposed to volunteer and give to charities because it's the right thing to do. I'm supposed to be nice because it means that I'm a good person and I'll go to heaven. And, yes, "I am supposed to," and guilt and shame, you get things done, but they lack the power of transformation that love provides.

Christ did not live and die and rise again so we could be nice. He didn't rise again so we would feel judged, and guilty, and never good enough. Jesus died and rose again to show us how completely we are loved. And to show how the world can be changed by love. Christ's death and resurrection changed reality. And now we can experience and be transformed by that love.

So we start with the love of Christ and become those who love others. "*Love one another as I have loved you.*"

So, again, what does it mean for the body of Christ to say, "I love you"? What does it look like to love one another? That is the question that drives us as a community.

To love one another is to be an imitator of Christ. It is to always be asking, how do I love in this situation? How am I going to benefit the other person, to build up the community, to build up the world, to use my talents for something greater than myself? How am I, how are we, going to love?

To love one another means to live into the person you were created to be. To use your gifts and talents in ways that strengthens others. To love is to hope for and work for the best possible future for both yourself and the other. It is not to be disgraced or devalued in sacrifice, to be the proverbial doormat, but to help all involved be what Christ calls us to be.

To love one another is to be honest about ourselves and others. Not everyone is loveable. We have those moments ourselves. Admit it. But to love as Jesus loves us is to live in grace; always starting again, always knowing that love can transform the beloved.

And, finally, to love one another is to be open to surprises. Peter, in the first lesson, was blown away that the Holy Spirit came down on the side of the others, of the gentiles. God said, "Don't change them. Change yourself. It is okay to eat the strange foods that have been banned, so you can love them."

Peter is surprised by that. But once he's pulled his jaw up from on the ground, he realizes that God loves those folks, too, and he will love them, too. God surprises us, pulling us from our certainties, our shoulds, and our habits, and helps us see new ways into the future.

As we live more deeply into relationships with God, and work to become imitators of Christ, we could begin to glimpse something greater than what I want and what I know. We can begin to see that great kingdom of God, that reign of Christ, and what it means to live in love.

So, what does it mean to say, "I love you"? It means to follow Jesus Christ, who has told us to love as we have been loved.

Amen.