

To Love As Christ Loved

John 15:12-17

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June 26, 2006

This was a tall order that Jesus gave his disciples: “Love one another, just as I have loved you.” I can think of a multitude of goals more easily attainable. Of course, no goal is worthy of our efforts so much as this one. “Love one another, just as I have loved you.”

The phrase “have loved” is translated into English in the past tense, like something that has already taken place. Jesus **is** talking about something that happened in the past, but in the original Greek, the phrase gives no indication as to whether or not the action was completed. In other words, it’s sort of open-ended or undefined. There is no way to pinpoint any particular instance or instances about which Jesus is speaking. It discourages the hearer and the reader from taking a trip down memory lane just yet. It requires further explanation... and Jesus gives it to them. “Greater love has no one than this, that one lay down his life for his friends.”

As 21st century Christians, we have the benefit of this book, the benefit of the inspired testimony of many faithful witnesses, particularly those of the New Testament. Our immediate response then is to say that he is surely talking about his death...his crucifixion. For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son. It was this only begotten Son, this Jesus, who willingly walked his way to the cross, to an agonizing death for the sake of the world, for the sake of sinners like you and me. Jesus loves me this I know for the bible tells me so...as it speaks of a crucified messiah...who on the third day became a risen Lord...and all who believe in Him shall not perish but have eternal life. “Greater love has no one than this, that one lay down his life for his friends.” And no greater wish has God than this, that all of God’s children might one day see Him face to face.

Of course, there is more to it than that. There is more to it than the **death** of Jesus. By not being specific about the way He had loved them, Jesus was encouraging those first disciples and us to take into account the whole of his life with the disciples...to take into account his ministry in its entirety.

So, what does it mean to lay down one’s life? Maybe it means more than just to die for something. Maybe it means to live for something. You see, Jesus laid down his life long before Good Friday. One could say that he laid down his life even by age 12. [The temple story... “Did you not know that I had to be in my Father’s house?”]

He certainly laid down his life in the Jordan River, when he was baptized by John and chose a very clear and concrete way to live for God. From that point forward, he preached the coming of the kingdom of God in the temple and in the streets. He preached the hope of that kingdom to all who would listen. Not only that, he brought healing to broken bodies, broken hearts, and broken lives. He preached

and taught and fellowshiped and worked miracles in the lives of others, because it was the will of His Father in heaven, and because he loved each life that he touched. O that we would be motivated more often by love for one another.

Not long before his death, Martin Luther King Jr. is reported to have spoken these words to the congregation at Atlanta's Ebenezer Baptist Church:

“If any of you are around when I have to meet my day, I don't want a long funeral. And if you get somebody to deliver the eulogy, tell them not to talk too long. Every now and then, I wonder what I want them to say. Tell them not to mention that I have a Nobel Peace Prize; that isn't important. Tell them not to mention that I have three or four hundred other awards; that's not important. Tell them not to mention where I went to school. I'd like somebody to mention that day that Martin Luther King Jr. tried to love somebody.”

Dr. King was a sinner just like the rest of us. Yet, he had the right idea about discipleship, the right idea about what it means to “bear fruit.” In essence, he wanted people to remember him not for the awards he won, but because the things he did that won those awards; he did those things out of love. In the passage before the one we heard this morning, Jesus said, “I am the vine, and you are the branches...My Father is glorified by this, that you bear much fruit, and so prove to be my disciples.” In other words, we are called to live out that familiar refrain, “They'll know we are Christians by our love, by our love. Yes, they'll know we are Christians by our love.” And when I say called, I mean called...chosen. Jesus said himself, “You did not choose me but I chose you, and appointed you that you would go and bear fruit...” So loving one another is not just a good idea...it is the fulfillment of our calling as Christians.

The reality is that our efforts to fulfill that calling will be hit and miss at best. Granted, some will bear more fruit than others will, but no one will bear as much fruit as Christ our Lord. Nevertheless, we are still called to love one another, as Christ has loved us.

Jesus goes on to say in the passage that follows today's reading, “If the world hates you, you know that it has hated me before it hated you.” He knew that the disciples would have a hard row to hoe, and not just those disciples, but every disciple thereafter. Everyone who lived in the name of Jesus would find herself or himself to be counter-cultural, in opposition to the secular world.

We are called to lay down our lives for Christ in service to Him and to others in a world that so often says that **your happiness** should always be the most important thing to you. The world says, “Love *you*. Do what makes *you* happy. Follow *your own* desires, even at the cost of others.” We live in a fast food, feel good, all-about-me culture. Jesus said, “Love one another. Love your neighbor as yourself. Deny yourself, pick up your cross and follow me.” The world provides us ways to live apart from one another. Jesus provides us a way to live together. And the only way to do that is to let love for Him and love for one another be the guiding force in our life together, particularly our life together as the body of Christ.

The General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church (USA) dealt with a number of controversial issues this past week, issues that threaten to divide us. My hope is that a split is not seen as the answer to disagreement. The PC (USA) has been an instrument of God's peace and justice around the world, and we have much more work to do. Yet, the truth is that living with too much fear over splits and divisions is to say that the future of the church is in the hands of someone other than Jesus Christ, the head and cornerstone. Yes, we should pray for unity and peace among us. That goes without saying. Even more so, we should pray that we might just continue to bear fruit; that we might continue to love one another, as Jesus has loved us; that we might be able to fulfill our calling as Christians, not that we might win or lose.

When Jesus called his servants his friends, he called them partners in His work in the world. We are called to love one another, and to carry that love into the world. We are called to give drink to those who are thirsty, feed those who are hungry, clothe the naked. And Jesus has revealed to us all we need to know from the Father to bear fruit. Even so, to truly love someone else, it takes a willingness to at least try to see things from their perspective

This past week our boys attended soccer camp at Winthrop. I dropped them off in the mornings and Peggi picked them up in the afternoons. One afternoon, they were walking between the bleachers and the concession stand, heading for the parking lot. If you haven't been to the soccer field at Winthrop, an extra-wide sidewalk separates the bleachers from the concession stand. Down the middle of the sidewalk is a grassy median. As Peggi and the boys were leaving, Robert, my 6 year old, was walking on one side of the grassy median, and a little girl from his team at camp was walking on the opposite side. The little girl said, "Robert! Come walk on this side." Robert said, "Why? Are you lonely over there?" She said, "Yeah. Walk over here." He said, "Okay," hopped over to her side of the median, and they walked on together. Borrowing language from Proverbs, I pray that the Lord may use even the innocent acts of a child to **train us up in the way we should go.**

Laying down our lives for Christ and for one another begins by seeing the world from the point of view of another, to respond to the needs of that other person. To lay down our lives for Christ and one another is to be willing to cross the boundaries that divide us, and to walk together in love. Jesus laid down his life for us not only on the cross, but also by his willingness to **live** for us, crossing boundaries for the sake of love. "This I command you," Jesus said, "That you love one another, as I have loved you."

To God be the glory, now and forever. Amen.