

Sermon
McCarter Presbyterian Church
5th Sunday of Easter
May 19, 2019

Old Testament Lesson

Leviticus 19:17-18

NT Lesson and Subject of Sermon

John 13:31-35

When he had gone out, Jesus said, “Now the Son of Man has been glorified, and God has been glorified in him. If God has been glorified in him, God will also glorify him in himself and will glorify him at once. Little children, I am with you only a little longer. You will look for me; and as I said to the Jews so now I say to you, ‘Where I am going, you cannot come.’ I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.”

Love- Really?

I served a congregation that heard often and emphatically that God loved them. That was, and remains, a great message. However, there are some other details about our **Reformed** traditions, the underlying meanings of worship, the role of **stewardship**, the practice of discipleship, and providing **Biblical scholarship** that had not taken up much time in worship, preaching, or education for this community of faith. So, during the interviews with the leadership, I was informed of my area for emphasis: “Preacher, we think we’ve got this love part down. Could you tell us about something else?”

Well, I think I understood some of their frustration, because it seemed that the previous pastor took this portion of scripture literally. Certainly, the pastor used some repetition, but perhaps the parishioners needed and thirsted for, a little more depth. As we go into this study together today, let us all pray that we can expand on the existing knowledge and conclusions that we all bring into worship today.

In these verses, Jesus tells us about **God’s love** for us. Most of us who are “cradle Christians” have heard these verses from an early time in our lives. However, there are a lot of worshipers who do not focus on the love of God, but place more emphasis on the **rules** and the punishments that are possible in faith and worship. The danger comes in leaving things like love, forgiveness, and acceptance far removed from the life of the church: the things that we preach and practice. If you grew up in the Upstate, very likely you have been exposed to this particularly harsh aspect of the church.

In these verses, we find Jesus continuing with radical forms of ministry, even as things are unraveling in the Upper Room. Why is Jesus putting this forward at this particular time? It was just a few moments earlier that Jesus instituted the **Lord’s supper**. Suddenly, Jesus shifted to

individual behavior and the focus and meaning of his ministry, as he taught the remaining disciples around him.

Jesus said that we must **love one another**. Very likely, that was peaking the interest of the disciples. But, his statement went further. At the core of Judaism was the **Law of Moses**, part of which we read this morning in *Leviticus*. These many laws and rulings were based on the original Ten Commandments, as you would suspect. The faithful of Israel, especially the **Pharisees** in the time of Jesus, were “all about” keeping these **rules** and remaining acceptable before God.

Today, there are no remaining Pharisees, but there are many Orthodox Jews who do all that they can to follow the law of God. They wear different clothing; they always keep their heads covered; they rarely cut their facial hair; and, they keep all manner of dietary rules. Like the Pharisees, many Christians seek to follow the rules strictly as well, thinking that this is most important to God and to their salvation. Like the Orthodox Jews of today, and the many devoted followers of Orthodox and Roman Catholic church orders in monasteries, there is something of merit in these efforts that truly must **please God**.

However, there is a danger in keeping the rules to the exclusion of **the remainder of God’s teachings**. A believer in the law could consider that God is keeping a continuous tally on their good “marks” along with their less favorable actions. The downside is that this process can become self-serving, far removed from worship, **ministry**, and service, as these faithful followers attempt to gain some form of constructive **credit** with the Almighty. That is, they could be seen as attempting to earn God’s favor through their “good works,” building them up in order to counteract, or **counterbalance**, the times that they slip up. There are numerous writings that **oppose** this approach from the apostle **Paul** and in the *Letter of James*.

The full force of these words from Jesus **contradicts** this common take on faith. Jesus is saying, “**No!**” There is a lot more to this. Keeping rules is all “well and good.” But, it not likely to change a person in a substantial way, nor does it affect anyone else the way that the **giving** part of love will do through the powerful **love of God** in Christ. That is why the *Gospel of John* portrays Jesus spelling this out for us.

And, if you think this is a **request**, or some type of option, truly it is not. Indeed, Jesus gives us a **command**. It is even more striking, since it happens at the height of the tension in the Upper Room. These words of Jesus were providing valuable guidance to the disciples and the early church: a process that seems continuous in *John*. With all this “heavy business” going on, Jesus speaks one of the most enduring commands of his ministry: **Love** one another.

So, with all that we have detailed this morning: Where do we see this form of **love** in our personal lives? Is there evidence of it in **our living**? Do we notice it **in the world** around us?

Jesus tells us that we must love one another.

“Great! Thank you, Jesus.”

That’s what we hear ourselves saying. But, how do we love someone we **detest**? How do we love those who have **hurt us**: physically, emotionally, even spiritually? Jesus tells us that if we do not have love, then we are **not true** to him or to God. Can we be certain that we already have this done? That this essential characteristic, this **foundational aspect** of our being, is “in our pocket,” as the phrase goes?

The **apostle Paul** and the writers of the *Letters of John* echo this aspect of love in the teachings of Jesus. There is not enough time to go into those parts of the New Testament in detail, but you can make a quick read and pick up on them pretty readily. This business of love, true accepting love, never loses its importance over time. Like the former pastor of my earlier congregation, it can even take on **a life of its own**. In addition, notice the **stark** and barren aspect of these **words**. They have warmth and **power**, but the language is stripped down.

We can see this simplicity readily: Notice the lack of rules. Unlike the hundreds of recommendations and refinements of Jewish law, Jesus uses **simple language** in a simple way. But, in doing so he creates **deep meaning** for you and me. Additionally, there are **no qualifications** in the language of Jesus, such as “if...” or “When...” You get it and **do it**, or you do not.

And, lastly since the term “love” is so complex in the original Greek, **which form** of love are we talking about? Certainly, it is not the love we express physically through our emotions: termed *eros* in Greek. Popular music and any manner of novels, plays, and screenplays focus on this aspect of our English word, “love.” It is not necessarily brotherly, which is *philia* in Greek. This can apply in many situations with close friends and lifelong acquaintances. But, it really cannot apply toward someone who **opposes you**, blocks your career development, or takes advantage of your friendship, trust, and financial generosity. And, it is not necessarily the family-type love of *sturge*, which we hear less often.

No, Jesus, and later the apostle Paul, use another form of love: *agape*. This is a **binding love** that goes beyond these other forms of love or the familiar friendship or devotion among family relationships. It conveys an **openness**: a one-sided underlying **vulnerability** that is recognizable once we experience it. In that sense, we could compare it to **faith** itself: It is nearly indescribable, but so very obvious to us as believers when it engages and **overwhelms** us.

Well, let’s face it. Jesus has reached the very core of our existence with these words. We love **all the time**, but today’s lesson tells us that what we typically do fall **far short** of this message from Jesus. We love our favorite old clothes or shoes. We love to eat out. We love a cold beverage on a hot day. We love our favorite dessert. We love our children and grandchildren. And, we love our best friend and our spouse. The list goes on.

And, there is even **unconditional love**, the kind that we show to our children and to our closest friends. Even when they make terrible mistakes, or hurt us, we still maintain deep feelings for them. Jesus wants us to remember this, because it is similar to **God’s love** for us.

But, Jesus is talking about love, not for the sake of love; nor does this describe our love for another person who is **worthy** of love. Like God’s love and the sacrifice of Jesus in love, Jesus tells us to love even when everything in our being says, “No! Don’t do that.” Our first reaction to people and our dominant culture tell us:

- **Hate** that person that wronged you.
- **Despise** the person who cost you your job.
- **Vilify** the person whose language you do not understand and whose culture seems totally opposed to all that you hold sacred.

Jesus says, **stop** the hurt and the hate. Give it up. **Love** this neighbor. Love them and hold them near. Do what Jesus did for you and me, for the **love of God**.

In this scripture lesson, we become a part of an intimate exchange between Jesus and the disciples. Jesus does not hesitate. He gives these followers a **direct command**. Love is the order. The “How?” of it is never explained. And, the “Why?” is implied, but never stated. The words of Jesus come to us in this special way in the *Gospel of John*.

One danger for us is that if we get too detached from his message, we might say something like the old Tina Turner song: “**What’s Love Got to Do with It?**” According to the love of God and the teachings of Christ, love has **everything** to do with everything **we do**: for ourselves and for **one another**.

So that leads me to the alternate title I had tucked away for this sermon:

Loving One Another: How Exactly Do We Do That?

Jesus leaves out any detailed instructions. Instead, we get a simple command: Just go and **do it**. Indeed, it’s pretty hard to mess this up. Some of you, like me, will probably find a way to get it wrong. But, God understands just how **imperfect** we are. But, God understands that offers us mercy and grace. We know this, because God **in Christ** will see us through everything that could be in our way: the way of **God’s love**.

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