

Called to be a Community of Love

Our first reading is Colossians, chapter 3, verses 12 through 17, which can be found on page 201 in the New Testament section of your pew bible.

Colossians, chapter 3, beginning with the 12th verse. Listen for God's word to you.

Colossians 3:12–17 (NRSV)

¹² As God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience. ¹³ Bear with one another and, if anyone has a complaint against another, forgive each other; just as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive. ¹⁴ Above all, clothe yourselves with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony. ¹⁵ And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in the one body. And be thankful. ¹⁶ Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly; teach and admonish one another in all wisdom; and with gratitude in your hearts sing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs to God. ¹⁷ And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.

Hear what the Spirit is saying to our church. **Thanks be to God.**

Our second reading is from the gospel of John, chapter 13, verses 21 through 38, which can be found on page 108 in the New Testament section of your pew bible. John, chapter 13, beginning with the 21st verse. Listen for God's word to you.

John 13:21–38 (NRSV)

²¹ After saying this Jesus was troubled in spirit, and declared, “Very truly, I tell you, one of you will betray me.” ²² The disciples looked at one another, uncertain of whom he was speaking. ²³ One of his disciples—the one whom Jesus loved—was reclining next to him; ²⁴ Simon Peter therefore motioned to him to ask Jesus of whom he was speaking. ²⁵ So while reclining next to Jesus, he asked him, “Lord, who is it?” ²⁶ Jesus answered, “It is the one to whom I give this piece of bread when I have dipped it in the dish.” So when he had dipped the piece of bread, he gave it to Judas son of Simon Iscariot. ²⁷ After he received the piece of bread, Satan entered into him. Jesus said to him, “Do quickly what you are going to do.” ²⁸ Now no one at the table knew why he said this to him. ²⁹ Some thought that, because Judas had the common purse, Jesus was telling him, “Buy what we need for the festival”; or, that he should give something to the poor. ³⁰ So, after receiving the piece of bread, he immediately went out. And it was night. ³¹ When he had gone out, Jesus said, “Now the Son of Man has been glorified, and God has been glorified

in him. ³² If God has been glorified in him, God will also glorify him in himself and will glorify him at once. ³³ 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.' ³⁴ I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. ³⁵ By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another." ³⁶ Simon Peter said to him, "Lord, where are you going?" Jesus answered, "Where I am going, you cannot follow me now; but you will follow afterward." ³⁷ Peter said to him, "Lord, why can I not follow you now? I will lay down my life for you." ³⁸ Jesus answered, "Will you lay down your life for me? Very truly, I tell you, before the cock crows, you will have denied me three times.

Hear what the Spirit is saying to our church. **Thanks be to God.**

People are hard to love, aren't they? We tend to hurt one another. We tend to disappoint one another. We often neglect one another.

And a lot of it has to do with our own selfishness. We are selfish people.

And some of us are hoarders of hurt, we carry around a lot of baggage, and we don't want to let things go. We hold onto our pain and we let it weigh us down.

Someone once said this and there is some truth in it. They said, "I love humanity; it's people I can't stand."

There's also the story of the man who told his wife that if she had really loved him, she would have married someone else. Of course, that could work the other way around.

And yet, we are called to be a community of love. Jesus said, "Love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another."

The apostle Paul told the church, "clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience. Bear with one another and, if anyone has a complaint against another, forgive each other; just as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive. Above all, clothe yourselves with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony.

During this season of Lent we've been looking at the calling of the church; how we are called to be a community of faith, hope, love, and witness.

This understanding of the church as a community of faith, a community of hope, a community of love, and a community of witness comes from

our Book of Order in describing the mission of the church. And when it gets to the part where it talks about the church being a community of love, it says this:

“The Church is to be a community of love, where sin is forgiven, reconciliation is accomplished, and the dividing walls of hostility are torn down.”

Notice something about that statement. It has a very different take on the meaning of love than we typically find around valentine’s day or even in Romantic comedies. It’s a very sober statement about love and how it is lived out.

It’s about love embodied in forgiveness and reconciliation and the removal of walls that separate and cessation of hostilities. It assumes that we hurt one another and let things get between us. And it calls us to be different.

If you’ve ever received an email from me, you know that I have a quote in Greek at the bottom of every email. Does anyone know what it says?

“We love because God first loved us.” God is our role model when it comes to love. God who loves us even when we are unloveable. God

who is committed to us, even when we go astray. God who chases after us and wants what is best for us; wants to give us good things.

If you look at our second reading, notice that when Jesus gives this command to love, he does so in between two episodes where he is going to be betrayed. Jesus has just washed his disciple's feet and Judas has just left to go and betray him. And he gives this command. And just after it, Peter declares his loyalty to Jesus, but Jesus knows that he is going to betray him also. Jesus knows this about us. God knows this about us. And yet, God loves us. And commands us to love one another.

But what kind of love does Jesus command us to have? If you've been in church very much at all, you probably know that the New Testament was originally written in Greek and the Greek language has several words that all get translated by the word "love" in English. Our English language is somewhat clumsy when it comes to expressing love. We have one word. The three most common words in Greek for love are:

- Eros which is where we get the word "erotic"; that's the love of passion.
- Phileo which is where we get the words Philadelphia and Philosophy; and we know that Philadelphia is the city of brotherly love, and philosophy is the love of wisdom; and so, Phileo, speaks of

love as affection, fondness, and liking the other. It's relational. It's the bond of family and friendship.

- But another kind of love, while incorporating those qualities, is somewhat unique, and that is the word Agape. Agape isn't based on merit, it is unconditional. It is a choice we make to seek the well-being of the other person regardless of their response. This love is kind and generous. It only desires good things for the other and is compassionate. It continues to give even when the other person is unkind, unresponsive and unworthy. It's the love of commitment. That's the kind of love we talk about when we say that God is love.

When Jesus talks about loving one another, he's talking about the Agape kind of love. And again, when he talks about love, it's not primarily about emotions or passion, but it's about forgiveness and commitment, and service to one another.

But why love? What makes it so important?

When Jesus spoke to the disciples regarding the first and second greatest commands, he explained that "All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commands" (Matt. 22:40).

To the people of Israel, it would seem more logical for obedience to be the peg from which the Law hangs, since the point of writing a law is that people would obey it. Jesus himself said "If you love Me, you will keep My commandments" (John 14:15). Yet Jesus also said, "I give you a new commandment: love one another. Just as I have loved you, you must also love one another" (John 13:34). The apostle Paul goes on to tell us "Love does no wrong to a neighbor. Love, therefore, is the fulfillment of the law" (Rom. 13:10).

The logic is simple. If you love your neighbor, you will not commit adultery with your neighbor's spouse. If you love your coworker, you will not lie to them. If you love your enemy, you will not slander them. Love fulfills the law, because if we truly love every person because they are a person, a person who was also created in the image of God, then we will not desire to hurt or violate them, and never break the law. God established love as the impetus for obedience.

When we demonstrate Christian love, it distinguishes believers from the rest of the world. "By this [love] all people will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another" (John 13:35). Notice Jesus did not say that people will know that you are my disciples if you promote

my agenda, or wear Christian T-shirts or a WWJD bracelet, or have a fish decal on your car, but rather if you love one another.

“A watching world will be persuaded not when our values are promoted but when they are incarnated, when we become purveyors of love. It is as though Jesus has given the entire world the right to judge whether or not one is His follower simply on the basis of their love for fellow human beings. The vivacious virtue of love distinguishes the Christian.”

From the very beginning, God's plan was to develop a people that reflected his character. And what is his character? Love. 1 John 4:16–17 says, “God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them. Love has been perfected among us in this: that we may have boldness on the day of judgment, because as he is, so are we in this world.”

The love we show to one another and offer to the world will always be the best advertisement that our church has. When Ira Gillett, a missionary to East Africa, returned home to report on his activities overseas, he related an interesting phenomenon. Repeatedly, Gillett had noticed how groups of Africans would walk past government hospitals and travel many extra miles to receive medical treatment at the

missionary compound. He finally asked a particular group why they walked the extra distance when the same treatments were available at the government clinics. The reply: "The medicines may be the same but the hands are different.

That's the virtue of love incarnated. That kind of love makes a difference. Christ has no hands, but our hands; no feet, but our feet. We are his ambassadors, representing him to the world. And when we love as he as loved us, it makes all the difference. People notice. Christian love is indispensable.

We must value one another. And when we value one another, we will want to spend time with one another. When we value one another, we will be interested in Love is primarily an active interest in the well-being of another person. Love acts for the benefit of others. According to William Barclay love *"is the spirit in the heart that will never seek anything but the highest good for another."*

Do we open ourselves up and make ourselves vulnerable to one another? Love opens up its life to another person. It goes beyond sentimental feelings. It breaks down barriers. It exposes the heart. C. S. Lewis, in *The Four Loves*, describes the vulnerable nature of love:

"To love is to be vulnerable. Love anything, and your heart will certainly be wrung and possibly broken. If you want to make sure of keeping it intact, you must give your heart to no one, not even to an animal. Wrap it carefully round with hobbies and little luxuries. Avoid all entanglements. Lock it up safe in the casket or coffin of your selfishness. But in that casket - safe, dark, motionless, airless - it will change. It will not be broken. Instead, it will become unbreakable, impenetrable, irredeemable."

Are we willing to sacrifice for one another; for the sake of love? Love is messy. It costs us something. It takes a chance. It goes out on a limb. It takes a gamble. I'm not saying that we should become passive doormats because sometimes people won't do right; sometimes people become abusive and need to hear about it and learn to do differently. But Christian love inevitably carries costs. In the end, the goal of the Christian life is love. The measure of our maturity is our love for God and our love for others. If we fail in our love, we have missed what it means to be a Christian.

What I long for, and what I hope you long for too, is a church and a world transformed by the abundant and scandalous love of God in Jesus Christ, a Church far more concerned with offering forgiveness and seeking reconciliation and far less concerned with the hurts that we carry and the

anger we hold towards people who have offended us. I long for a church that is far more concerned with seeking out and welcoming those who are missing from Christ's table and far less concerned about the perceived shortcomings of others. This should be the community where we learn about and practice the life of love; where learn and grow and become the people God wants us to be; a reflection of Christ and his love.

Living together as a community of faith is always going to be messy and challenging. We are going to laugh, we are going to cry, we are going hurt one another, we might even fight a little. But we should always be willing to offer love to one another. We should always be the first ones to reach out in love and extend an olive branch of peace, and push past our hurts. The church is a beautiful community when it becomes a place where love is embodied and spoken and lived.

Can we do it? Can we love others in this way? Only if each of us makes a commitment to the way of love. Only if each of us fixes our eyes on the one who shows us how to live the life of love. Only if each us, offers our hearts and our minds, our hurts and hopes to God.

In the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.