

What is Love? — Rev. Denise Stone

Text: John 15:9-17

FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH BIG FLATS NY, 05-09-2021

The passage I will be reading in a few moments picks up where we left off last week. This is still part of Jesus' teaching about the "Vine and the Branches."

If you will recall, I shared with you Eugene Peterson's translation of verses 1-8 where the word that many translations choose for abide, he chose "home" – abide in me became make your home in me.

Keep that in the back of your mind as I read John 15, verses 9 to 17.

⁹ As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love. ¹⁰ 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. ¹¹ I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete.

¹² "This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. ¹³ No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends. ¹⁴ You are my friends if you do what I command you. ¹⁵ 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. ¹⁶ 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. ¹⁷ I am giving you these commands so that you may love one another.ⁱ

The Word of the Lord, **Thanks Be to God**

I want to begin today by asking you the question – What is Love?

What is love as we use the term in our everyday life and what is love as we understand it in the Biblical text for today?

If you listen to many popular songs of the past decades, they are mostly about love. Falling in love, falling out of love, dreaming of love, etc.

Love is often the topic or subplot of many books and movies. The word “love” is used so often today that it seems in many ways to have lost significant meaning. For example: I love coffee, I love “Doctor Who,” I love my family, I love my spouse, I love sunsets, I love peanut butter and jelly sandwiches. And on and on and on.

If you Google “Definition of Love” – the first return has both the noun and verb definitions:

noun

1. an intense feeling of deep affection.
2. a great interest and pleasure in something.

verb

1. feel deep affection for (someone).
2. like or enjoy very much.

None of these definitions encompass the word we find used in today's passage.

The Greek word here which we translate as love is *Agapé*.

Love in this sense is a *theological virtue*: an excellence of character that God has by nature and in which we participate by grace. Such love is primarily interested in the good of the other person, rather than one's own.ⁱⁱ

This passage is about a deeper, more significant kind of love than most of us generally talk about.

I want to re-read verses 9-10 from *The Message*.

⁹⁻¹⁰ "I've loved you the way my Father has loved me. Make yourselves at home in my love. If you keep my commands, you'll remain intimately at home in my love. That's what I've done—kept my Father's commands and made myself at home in his love."ⁱⁱⁱ

- Make yourselves at home in my love.

- If you keep my commands, you'll remain intimately at home in my love.

Wow.

It is not enough for Jesus to tell us to make our home in his love, he tells us that we are to do that, just as he makes his home in God the Creator, his parent.

Let's come back to verse 11 in a minute.

Look at verses 12 and 13.

¹² "This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. ¹³ No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends.

Jesus is preparing his disciples to later understand just how deep God's love for them is and how deep their love for one another will need to be.

Verse 13 is pivotal in understanding Jesus and the role of community.

In his part of the commentary on this passage in *Feasting on the Word*, Thomas H. Troeger, notes that this verse's meaning shifts depending on the context in which it is read.

If in the face of Jesus' impending death we read, "No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life

for one's friends" (15:13), then the verse leaps out to us as an interpretation of the sacrificial action Christ is about to suffer. But what happens if we read it in the context of the community of John, as it encounters increasing conflict and persecution at the end of the first century CE? The words seem no longer to refer only to Christ and his death, but to the sacrifice of members of the community.^{iv}

We do not have to choose one reading over the other. Both are correct. They also tell us how the words of Jesus continue to be applicable to settings later than when he first spoke them.

These words are still applicable to us today.

This whole passage – including the parts about the vine and the branches – are told to Jesus' disciples, to John's Community and even to us... why? So that Jesus' joy may be in us and that our joy may be complete.

What else does this passage tell us?

Look again at verses 14-17:

¹⁴ You are my friends if you do what I command you. ¹⁵ 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. ¹⁶ 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. ¹⁷ I am giving you these commands so that you may love one another.

“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.”

Jesus calls us friends. He chose us and has made God the Father/ Creator known to us – in ways we cannot even imagine as possible.

Then Jesus, bringing back in the bearing fruit idea from earlier in this chapter, says that he appointed us to go and bear fruit, fruit that will last, so that the Father will give us whatever we ask in HIS name.

The primary reason for Jesus giving us these commands, these instructions are so that WE may LOVE one another.

That we may love each other in ways that are primarily interested in the GOOD of THE OTHER PERSON, rather than in ourselves.

Professor Michael Chan puts it this way,

For John 15:9-17, love is both a gift and a command: “As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love.” The love that Jesus displays for the world is a love whose origin is in God, the heavenly Father. It’s a heavenly love but not a love that

remains in heaven. It insists on dwelling among us (John 1:14).^v

How do we manifest this kind of love in the here and now? How can we as members of the community of Christ living in and around the Town of Big Flats demonstrate this *agapé* kind of love?

Remember that this call to be the branches to Jesus' vine is not a singular call. While we may have individual opportunities to love, serve and share Christ with others, it is also a communal call. We are to be dependent on Jesus our vine and we are to be interdependent on one another as the branches.

Another Professor, Gennifer Benjamin Brooks, in discussing this passage points out,

The church that is committed to the love that Jesus calls us to live, must offer that life-giving friendship openly and equally to all people, regardless of color [,religion, gender, age, national origin, etc. etc.]. It is a serious charge, a dangerous charge, and a life-risking endeavor. But Christ requires it of the church that is committed to bearing fruit that will last. And it is Christ who says: "I am giving you these commands so that you will love one another."^{vi}

We are called to live out our faith in Jesus Christ in ways that may and often are dangerous.

We are called to embrace and love and include those people who may and often are excluded.

We are called to embrace and love and include those people who may and often are hard to embrace, love and include.

We are called to serve, without reservation, those people with whom we might disagree or believe differently on any number of topics.

In a few weeks, we will have the opportunity to gather on Sunday morning, May 31st to worship through service. This will be one of the first steps for us, collectively, to reach out beyond the walls of our church into our community.

We are looking to put together “Blessing Bags” for people at the Falck Cancer Center. There will be more information on how you can be involved in this effort in the next couple of weeks.

The point is, that we, as the First Presbyterian Church at Big Flats, NY, WE need to expand our notions of worshipping God to include being at home in the *agapé* love of God – in putting the needs of others before ourselves.

One last quote for you this morning. Professor Osvaldo Vena says,

The love God showed toward Jesus he showed toward his disciples so they could show it to each

other. When they love in this way, their love becomes impregnated with divine qualities. It is not just an emotional, cozy feeling, but a conscious decision to put yourself on the line and risk everything for the other. This kind of love will make sure that justice is done in the world. You will venture yourself from the safety of your community into the broader society to see that it is transformed by this sacrificial love that Jesus modeled for us.... justice is the shape love takes in society.^{vii}

May we venture from the safety of our community into the broader society to see that it is transformed by this sacrificial love that Jesus modeled for us.

What is love?

Jesus is love. We are to make our home in that love. In that love, we are to offer that home to others.

Let us pray.

Holy God, help us to remember that

It's all in the touch,
the touch of love,
the touch of healing,
the touch of compassion,
the touch of reassurance,
the touch that says,

'You are special, wanted,
held in high regard'.
It's all in that touch,
that very special touch,
the touch you give through us
who reach out to those in need,
to those who need to know.
Help us to be channels of your touch
in this dark world,
to bring your love,
healing,
compassion,
and reassurance,
to a world that knows
none of these.^{viii}

We pray this in Jesus name, **Amen!**

ⁱ Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture references are from the New Revised Standard Version Bible, copyright © 1989 the Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

ⁱⁱ Feasting on the Word, p. 498.

ⁱⁱⁱ The Message (MSG) Copyright © 1993, 2002, 2018 by Eugene H. Peterson.

^{iv} Feasting on the Word, pp. 497 and 499.

^v <https://www.workingpreacher.org/dear-working-preacher/rethinking-love>.

^{vi} <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/sixth-sunday-of-easter-2/commentary-on-john-159-17-5>.

^{vii} <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/sixth-sunday-of-easter-2/commentary-on-john-159-17-4>.

^{viii} <https://www.faithandworship.com/world.htm#gsc.tab=0>.