

Sermon Title: Love Without End
Sermon Text: John 15:5-17
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Immanuel Baptist Church
Chuck Queen, Pastor

Jesus says, “My command is this: Love each other as I have loved you.” This instruction is part of a larger body of teaching that is commonly referred to as Jesus’ upper room discourse. Jesus begins this discourse by washing the feet of the disciples. This is how the Gospel writer introduces this section of Scripture: “It was just before the Passover Festival. Jesus knew that the hour had come for him to leave this world and go to the Father. Having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end.” He loved them to the end.

Jesus was a loyal and faithful friend. He called them his friends, because all that the Father had made known to him he had shared with his disciples. Jesus included them in all that he was about; he withheld nothing. They thought they could return Jesus’ love, but they failed. Not one of them could bear the ridicule and rejection that Jesus would bear. They all fled the scene, they all deserted Jesus and denied their connection to him—a sad betrayal of one who loved them to the very end. And yet Jesus did not hold their denial and desertion against them.

God’s love that has become incarnate in Jesus is an unconditional love. There is nothing we can do that is good that would make God love us more than God loves us now. And the reverse is also true: there is no bad thing we can do that would make God love us any less than God loves us now. That doesn’t mean, obviously, that God doesn’t care what we do. God cares deeply about what we do—the way a loving Parent cares about a child. God is grieved and pained when we reject God’s love, when we do harm or evil to one of God’s children, or when we disregard God’s creation and our stewardship of the earth. God suffers our sin and selfishness. God may get angry with us, but it is an anger born of love.

I suppose we can debate whether or not the President of the United States or a key representative should meet with other global leaders without preconditions. But I can assure you that God meets with us without preconditions. God accepts us without preconditions. God doesn’t say, “I love you—if you believe the right things, if you say the right things, if you do the right things.” God says, “I love you—period.” There’s no list of do’s and don’ts, no prescribed formulas, no hoops to jump through.

Paul Tillich was a renowned theologian in the 40’s, 50’s and early 60’s; he died in 1965. His most popular and enduring book is entitled, *The Courage to Be*. The old world, he contended, was like Humpty Dumpty; it had fallen and could never be reconstructed. The “courage to be” was the courage to live in such a world without despair. He wrote that the

courage to be is “the courage to accept oneself as accepted in spite of being unacceptable.” His book is a very difficult read, but his sermons were more down to earth. Perhaps his most famous sermon that gets to the essence of his theology was entitled “You Are Accepted.” He proclaimed: “You are accepted. You are accepted by that which is greater than you, and the name of which you do not know. Do not ask the name now; perhaps you will find it later. Do not try to do anything now; perhaps later you will do much. Do not seek for anything; do not intend anything. Simply accept the fact that you are accepted. If that happens to us, we experience grace.”

Though we may see ourselves as unacceptable and though others may see us as unacceptable to accept the fact that God accepts us is the first act of courage in an inhospitable world. God is more gracious and generous than we are, and to accept God’s grace, to accept God’s generosity is to know what love is. God’s love is unconditional.

God’s love is also inclusive. When Jesus says love one another he is not limiting this to the disciples, to those in their group or community. In the other Gospels Jesus highlights the instruction in the Torah that says to love your neighbor as you love yourself. And in Jesus’ interpretation and application of that principle he closes any loophole. In Luke’s Gospel an expert in the Law seeking to justify himself says, “Who is my neighbor?” and Jesus responds with the parable of the Good Samaritan.

A lot of folks miss the real significance of that story so it’s helpful to retell the story to fit our own times, perhaps the way Jesus would tell the story to us. Jesus might say. “There was a homeless man in one of our major cities beaten by thugs and left for dead. A Baptist pastor on his way to an evangelism conference saw the man in need but turned his head and passed by. An Episcopal priest on his way to lead worship saw the man in need but turned his head and passed by. Then a Moslem immigrant, who had fled to this country and entered illegally to escape persecution and poverty, saw the man, and stopped to care for him. He called 911 and waited for the ambulance. He accompanied him to the hospital and sat with him throughout the evening. When it was clear he would recover he slipped away. Who was the neighbor to the man in need?” The one who had mercy on him.

God does not see color or religion or gender or sexual orientation or social status or anything else. God’s love is an inclusive love. I recommend to you the books of Peter Gomes, who is minister of Harvard University’s Memorial Church and serves as Professor of Christian Morals. He has written book with titles such as, “The Good Book” and “The Good Life” and has published several books of sermons, but I think his latest book is his best, *The Scandalous Gospel of Jesus: What’s So Good About the Good News?* He tells about being on a panel with Rick Warren, mega church pastor of Saddleback Church in California and author of the book, “The Purpose-Driven Life” that has sold millions of copies. He jokingly said to Pastor Warren that he was guilty of the sins of envy and

covetousness—for he envied his sales and coveted his royalties. Dr. Gomes says, “He took the remark in good humor, as he could well afford to do.”

They were asked a variety of questions, but one question the interrogators particularly focused on was whether anyone can be saved who is not a born-again Christian. Gomes says, “Rick’s answer was as generous as his theology would allow, but the crux of the matter for him were the words in John’s Gospel, “I am the way, the truth, and the life; no man cometh unto the Father but by me.” Pastor Warren then threw the smoldering potato over to Reverend Gomes. Gomes responded by saying that he could not imagine that the God who is the creator of all has no plan of salvation for the billions of others in this world, and perhaps even beyond our galaxy, except the New Testament one. “Surely,” says Gomes, “God has not forgotten those of his creation who are not Christians. Romans tells us that he certainly has not forgotten the Jews.” After he said that Rev. Gomes turned to Pastor Warren and said: “So, Rick, I can only conclude that my God is bigger than yours.” God is certainly more gracious, more compassionate, more generous than any of us would ever think about being. And that is why that whenever we shape God into our image we end up with a little God.

God’s love is unconditional and God’s love is inclusive, but that does not mean that God’s love is soft or easy. If Jesus is the incarnation of God’s love then God’s love is clearly confrontational. Jesus’ healing, preaching, and teaching challenged the conventional wisdom of his day and upset the status quo. Jesus refused to play by the rules of the religious establishment and went around the gatekeepers time and time again to their outrage. Even the folks in his hometown were ready to throw him off a cliff after he preached his first sermon.

Jesus would never be elected President by American Christians. He wouldn’t even make it into the Senate or House. This is water under the bridge now so I think I’m safe to mention it, but think about all the ruckus that was stirred up when then Senator Obama told Joe the plumber that he wanted to spread the wealth around. I wonder what kind of rhetoric Jesus would stir up today if he told the CEO of AIG what he told the rich young ruler who wanted a place in God’s kingdom. Jesus said, “Sell all that you have, give it to the poor, and come follow me.” Talk about redistribution of wealth. I wonder what fox news would do with that.

Jesus was a non-violent radical. Jesus said, “Blessed are you who are poor for yours is the kingdom of God. Blessed are you who hunger now, for you will be satisfied”; then, according to Luke’s Gospel, he turned around and said, “Woe to you who are rich, for you have already received your comfort. Woe to you who are well fed now, for you will go hungry.” That sounds to me like I’m going to go hungry. I’m well-fed; I don’t miss a meal. It’s my wife’s fault—she’s a very good cook. That’s pretty radical, don’t you think? The most common one-liner from Jesus in the Gospels is this: “The first will be last, and the

last will be first.” God’s going to flip the world upside down. Is that not radical? Jesus went to parties where the key participants were prostitutes and tax collectors. They were not debating politics. We have Americanized and domesticated Jesus.

Some of you think that I’m kind of radical. I’m no where near radical. I sometimes wish I was, but to be honest, I’m a wimp. We preachers can’t afford to be too radical; but Jesus didn’t take any money from the religious establishment. I like the way C.S. Lewis in one of his stories about Narnia describes Aslan, the Christ figure. One of the characters says about Aslan: “He is no tame lion.” Jesus was no tame prophet.

Do you remember that scene in the movie “A Few Good Men” where Jack Nicholson says as only he can, in his rant in the courtroom at the end of the movie, “You can’t handle the truth”? He, of course, was the one who couldn’t handle the truth. Most of us can’t handle the truth. In John 6 after Jesus had told his followers the truth about himself, John says, “From this time many of his disciples turned back and no longer followed him.” We preachers can’t be too truthful or we wouldn’t have a congregation; we would be in the unemployment line. We have to offer truth in small doses and even then we get allergic reactions. I’m not a radical. Jesus is radical. I’m not even close to being like Jesus.

So don’t think brothers and sisters for one minute that because God’s love is unconditional or because God’s love is inclusive that God’s love is weak or mild or easy. God’s love is confrontational and challenging; and we need people in our lives who, as Paul says, “speak the truth in love.”

One last thing, Jesus demonstrates that God’s love is sacrificial. It is unconditional, inclusive, confrontational, and sacrificial. “Greater love has no one than this: to lay down one’s life for one’s friends.” And God doesn’t have enemies, God only has friends. God so loved the world that he gave his only Son.

Why did Jesus have to die? Well, he didn’t have to die, but he did die, and his death is a revelation of God’s love. I think Paul captured it best when he said, “God demonstrated God’s love for us, in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.” Jesus didn’t have to die to pay off God or erase a debt or remove a penalty—that’s not why his death is sacrificial. God didn’t need to be propitiated or appeased or placated or somehow coerced to forgive sinners; it’s God’s nature to forgive.

God didn’t put Jesus to death, we did. Jesus didn’t have to die to make some sort of atonement to God. It’s for our atonement that Jesus died, not God’s. Jesus’ self-giving unto death shows us how far God was and is willing to go to redeem us. If we believe that Jesus is the Word made flesh, that Jesus is the incarnation of God’s love, then, it is God, it is Divine Love that was crucified by sinful human beings. “Herein is love,” says John, “not that we first loved God, but that God first loved us and sent his Son as the atoning sacrifice

for our sins.” Not to make atonement to God, but to bring atonement to us, that the evil and hate in our hearts would be exposed, and that we would repent of our meanness (our greed and hate and jealousy and all the rest) and accept our acceptance and become accepting, forgiving people.

In this passage in John the imagery of the vine and the branches is meant to convey the nature of the relationship between Christ and his disciples. The branches that are fruit bearing—that are healthy, vibrant, and productive—produce fruit only because of their connection to the vine. The branches that are severed from the vine wither and die.

What we are doing here now—as we eat the bread and drink the cup—as we remember and give thanks for the love of Christ and of God poured out in death and poured upon us through the Divine Spirit—as we eat and drink and remember and give thanks this helps us to maintain and nurture our connection to the living Christ.

This is why we need the church, this is why we need the body of Christ, this is why we keep the Lord’s Supper and do this over and over—to remind us that we are forgiven, that we are accepted and loved, and that we are called to be an accepting, forgiving, and loving people. We do this to stay connected to the living Christ so that we can know Christ’s love, so that Christ’s love can fill us and that Christ’s love can flow through us to the world. Amen.