

“What the World Needs Now”

John 15:9-17

10/21/18

Shortly before his assassination Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr. addressed his congregation at Atlanta’s Ebenezer Baptist Church. He told them that if any of them were around when he left this earth that he wanted a short funeral. And he didn’t want people talking about his accomplishments- his hundreds of awards, his academic degrees, or even his Nobel Peace Prize. He said those things weren’t important. What he really wanted was for the preacher to say that Martin Luther King, Jr. tried to love somebody. That was it.

In this request, King was reflecting Jesus’ teaching in John 15, which is where we find our text for this morning as we continue in John’s gospel. As Jesus gives his final instructions to his disciples, he has promised them that the Holy Spirit will soon come to live with them, and that as the branches of a grapevine need to stay connected to the vine, they need to stay connected to him. “Abide with me,” he says. Then we find verses 9-11.

⁹As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love. ¹⁰If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father’s commandments and abide in his love. ¹¹I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete.

(John 15:9-11)

Here, Jesus again calls the disciples to abide in his love and says that the proof that they are abiding in his love is their obedience to his commandments. Now talk about obeying commandments can make the Christian life sound a bit rigid and dour. And some Christians believe that's the way it should be! In fact, someone once said that a Calvinist is someone who lies awake at night worrying that someone, somewhere is having fun! If that's true, those Calvinists need to read John! Here, Jesus says that remaining connected to him and obeying his commands leads to joyful living! Jesus isn't calling his followers to a guilt-plagued, onerous, laugh-free existence; He's calling them to a life filled with joy, as we live the way we were created to live.

However, these verses don't tell us what the commands of Jesus are that we're supposed to obey. Let's keep reading.

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

am giving you these commands so that you may love one another. (John 15:12-17)

Jesus focuses their attention on just one of his commandments: “*Love one another as I have loved you.*” Those words form a bookend at the beginning and end of the passage. But a command to love others raises some questions. How can you command someone to feel a certain way toward other people? After all, when we talk about loving someone, we are usually speaking about having feelings of affection for them. How can Jesus expect us to gin up warm, happy thoughts about other people, some of whom we can barely stand to be around? Fortunately, that’s not what Jesus has in mind here. Unfortunately, he has something much more difficult in mind.

You see, the Greeks had a handful of words which we translate as “love.” They had separate words for friendship love, romantic love, and family love, for example. And then they had the word that Jesus uses here, “agape.” It’s the same word used to describe God’s love for us. It is a word of action rather than feeling, although feelings may certainly be included in it. Agape-love means to act in the best interest of the other person. What does that look like in real life? The disciples had watched Jesus carefully for the last three years. So Jesus told them they should imitate the way he had loved them. That’s what love looks like in real life.

When we studied this passage in my small group last Tuesday, we listed some of the ways in which Jesus loved his disciples. We noted first of all that he was the one who invited them into a relationship. “*You did not choose me, but I chose you,*” he said. We noticed that his love was patient with them. The disciples often did or said the wrong thing, or couldn’t understand what Jesus was trying to say. But he didn’t give up on them, patiently re-explaining things or waiting until a later time to try again. He was patient. He was also compassionate with them, caring for them like a Good Shepherd. He understood their weaknesses and helped them. He also taught them the truth about God, himself, and themselves, so they could make better decisions about how they would live, about what they would invest their lives in, and even how they would use their money. He also corrected them when that was in their best interest! That was often painful in the short run, but helpful and loving in the long run.

And, of course, he was self-sacrificing. Just his presence with them as a human being, as the magnificent Word made flesh, was self-sacrificing. And, as verse 13 reminds us, he was about to lay down his life for them, the ultimate act of sacrifice.

In 1908 Ernest Shackleton led an expedition attempting to reach the South Pole. They came closer than anyone had before, but fell 97 miles

short of their goal, and had to turn back. It was not at all certain that they would get out alive.

In his diary Shackleton told of a time when they had run out of food supplies, except for one last ration of hardtack, a sort of dried biscuit. Each man received his final ration. Some of the men melted snow to make tea to drink with their hardtack. Others saved their ration, knowing they might need it more later. As the hungry men climbed into their sleeping bags around a fire, Shackleton stayed awake. He noticed one of his most trusted men sit up and look carefully around to make sure no one was watching. His heart sank as the man began to reach toward the food sack of the man next to him. Then he watched as the man opened the food sack and took his own hardtack and put it in the other man's sack. Self-sacrificing love, when it cost the most and counted the most. Jesus calls us to that kind of love for one another, the same kind of love he had for us.

After our small group meeting Tuesday evening, Bonnie and I were taking a walk around the neighborhood. We both noticed a woman in her garage, just standing there looking around. We'll call her Sally. Sally is a single older woman, who was widowed about three years ago. Bonnie called out to her, and she seemed a little confused because she couldn't see us in the dark. So Bonnie walked up to the garage to see if she was alright. I followed. It turns out that she was concerned about a gasoline

smell in her garage. Well, I went immediately into guy-mode and began figuring out the problem. The smell was coming, not from her car as she feared, but from a lawn tractor. And, fortunately, there was no gas dripping on the floor. Then she remembered that her son had come by the day before and had filled the gas tank and had probably spilled some gasoline there.

Assuming our job was done, I turned to leave and was soon out of the garage. I was tired after a long day, and ready to get home. But Sally continued to talk, and as Bonnie listened she soon was talking about how she still missed her husband every single day even after three years. She began crying. Bonnie gave her a long hug of comfort while I stood nearby.

The irony didn't escape me that I had just led a Bible study on "Love one another," and without Bonnie's help I would have completely missed an opportunity to actually live that out. And I still didn't live it out as well as she did. The command to love one another is amazingly simple and amazingly difficult at the same time. It involves reprogramming ourselves from top to bottom- to be aware of the needs of others all around us, and to be willing to set aside our own needs to help others when we can. Just being aware of the needs of others is where many of us get stuck. We are so focused on our own goals or just getting everything done on our daily lists, that we just don't see real needs right in front of our faces. Or, we

selfishly pretend we don't see them because we don't want to invest the time and energy needed to deal with them!

Living with the goal of loving others is a counter-cultural, almost subversive way to live. Think about the new norms in our political discourse this election season. Political foes are treated not as people made in God's image with whom we happen to disagree, but as enemies, people to be stomped on and utterly destroyed in our desire to win. That is not the way Jesus' followers ought to act. Our way is to love one another, even when we disagree. And that is what God intends for his whole world. The commandment to love affects our political lives, our work lives, and our family lives. Are our interactions at work and at home characterized by genuine, Christ-like love, or by nitpicking pettiness, callous disregard, or unbridled ambition? "What the world needs now is love," in the words of Hal David.

Living a life characterized by love will stand out in our world. It won't be easy. It will be criticized as naïve and unhelpful, but ultimately it will prevail, just as it did in the Roman Empire as pagan rulers were astonished by the loving actions of Christians in their domains, and many were eventually persuaded to follow Jesus, too.

Jesus said, “*This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you.*” How are you doing with that? At your funeral, will people say, “There was someone who tried to love others?”