

Sermon Preached by Pastor Jennifer Rose
Luke 15:9-17
"Love One Another"
Mother's Day
May 10, 2015

Dear Friends in Christ: Grace be unto you and Peace from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

When I was a little girl growing up, my mom told me what her mom told her:
"Pretty is as pretty does."

My daddy's mama had a word to add:
"Make yourself useful as well as decorative."

Moms are good at giving out this type of advice.

At church I heard more pieces of advice
"Go and sin no more."
"Forgive 70 x 7 times."
"Be perfect as your Father in heaven is perfect."
"Go and make disciples of all nations."
"Be angry, but sin not."
"Love your enemies, and pray for those that hate you."

I think that these phrases that we hear over and over again sort of eventually take on a life of their own. From this week's text, for instance, comes a verse that even non-religious people probably know, but they don't necessarily know where it came from or exactly what it means.

"Greater love hath no man..." Wait, I'm hearing it in my head in the King James Version.

We read it this way:
No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends. (John 15:13, NRSV)

But I hear it this way, no matter how many other ways I read it:
Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends. (John 15:13, KJV)

How many of you know this, have heard it this way, too? I associate it with war movies, and the noble sacrifice of one character who makes it possible for all the other characters to live. A group of men from different walks of life are gathered with a mission to perform, and some or all of them are going to die, but usually one makes the sacrifice. You can see it coming almost from the beginning of the movie.

In that room where Jesus gathered with his disciples on the last night of his human life, he was the only one who could see what was coming. Everyone else was still struggling to understand basic principles of his teaching. He spent the whole evening, according to John's gospel, making one last attempt to impress on them the importance of love.

"This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you."

It's not the only time he says something like this. Later he says that's how people will *know* they are his disciples, by the way they love each other.

And then he goes on to talk about laying down his life.

If he's asking us to do the same, we may want to put this back on that list I started with and simply set those verses aside as being the rule for more dedicated and faithful people than we can ever hope to be. And while I don't want to let us off the hook—a life of faith often involves some sacrifice of what we want—it's also possible he was simply talking about himself. You see, he was getting ready to lay his own life down to accomplish a purpose we can't duplicate. He was laying down his own life to save us from isolation and sin and disconnection, to show in the reality of his death and his resurrection that God exists and cares for us. In these words spoken in the brief space between dinner and arrest, he tried to tell them again what to do. Love one another.

That's not always easy. It sounds nice, but it's not always easy. Think for a moment about someone you find hard to love.

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No, really. Think about it.

I suspect the disciples were just like some of the people you're thinking of. They were individuals from different walks of life, just like those guys in the foxhole movies, and they were tired from being on the road and on the run for three years, and they were puzzled by this man who they loved, they really did, but why was he telling them to love each other? Wasn't it enough to love him?

They didn't understand that he was preparing them for a time when they would have to manage on their own, when their actions and decisions would be made not by asking him what came next but by calling on their memories of things he did and things he said. You're not my servants, he said on that last night, and in that one idea he up-ended all their ideas of how the world worked. He took away the hierarchy of master and servant and brought them onto his level, as friends. And he made it clear that as friends, sent out together to continue his teaching, they would need each other's love.

"Go and sin no more."

"Forgive 70 x 7 times."

"Be perfect as your Father in heaven is perfect."

“Go and make disciples of all nations.”

“Love your enemies, and pray for those that hate you.”

These are just some of the things we do to live that love Jesus was talking about with his close friends on the last night they were together before the world changed completely.

Or maybe they are some of the things we don't do, but think we should.

“This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you.”

And Jesus loved. My goodness, did he love. He loved us all, broken and difficult as we might be, without regard to where we live or what we eat or how we pray or who we love...or can't manage to love. He simply loved us.

God loves us, with tremendous patience, and I imagine a good sense of humor because how else could God do it, and taking a long view of our possibilities, and never forgetting grace—the promise that we are forgiven and loved not because we deserve it but because God wants to do it. I only have to look back a few minutes to the last time I did not love with patience and humor and the long view, and I'm counting on God's grace because it's possible I need to be forgiven for it.

Think again about someone you find hard to love. Is it someone in public life? Or maybe a whole group of people? Maybe it's someone long dead but still rankling you. Is it someone close to home? Maybe it's someone right in this room. Love one another as I have loved you. It's a commandment, an order, and it's not all hearts and flowers. It's work. It wears us out.

Do any of you remember “The Velveteen Rabbit?” I read it to Chloe a few weeks ago. If you haven't read it, this would be a good thing to add to your summer reading list. “The Velveteen Rabbit,” by Margery Williams, is a story about a stuffed toy who wanted to know what it means to be real. He asked the Skin Horse, one of the older toys, to explain it to him and learned that you become real by being loved.

“Does it hurt?” asked the Rabbit.

“Sometimes,” said the Skin Horse, for he was always truthful. “When you are Real you don't mind being hurt.”

“Does it happen all at once, like being wound up,” he asked, “or bit by bit?”

“It doesn't happen all at once,” said the Skin Horse. “You become. It takes a long time. That's why it doesn't often happen to people who break easily, or have sharp edges, or who have to be carefully kept. Generally, by the time you are Real, most of your hair has been loved off, and your eyes drop out and you get loose in the joints and very shabby. But these things don't matter at all, because once you are Real you can't be ugly, except to people who don't understand.”

Love wears us out and makes us real, the giving and the receiving of it. We become.

And here's the wonder of it. God made God's own self real. God became. God became human and material and touchable, because God loves us. God even let us deal out death to God's own self in Jesus Christ, to show a love beyond our imagining.

And in return Jesus asks us, he commands us, to love one another. It's as simple and as complicated as that. He commands us to love one another, and that has implications for the way we talk to each other and the way we spend our money and the way we commit our time and the way we represent Jesus to people who don't know about him yet and the way we cope with the people who are hardest to love.

It requires tremendous patience, and a good sense of humor because how else could we do it, and taking a long view of each other's possibilities, and never forgetting the grace we have been given. I'm not always good at it, but I'll keep trying. Will you?

So today, to help each of us remember God's incredible love for us, and the ways in which God's love goes with us wherever we go, I'd like to invite our kids – and anyone who would like to - to participate in a project with me, over the summer, and we're going to start this project this week, since next week is a little busy with the last day of Sunday school. I've got here a Flat Jesus. (This is like Flat Stanley, if you've ever heard of him.) Flat Jesus can go with me anywhere – to the beach, to the movies, and everywhere I'd like him to go. If you'd like to make a Flat Jesus yourself, during the hymn of the day today I'll invite you to come up here and pick one up. You can color him and cut him out, and if you want to, you can bring him to the church office to have him laminated so that you can even take him swimming. On Flat Jesus, there is a hashtag, so that your parents can tag your pictures and upload them so that we can see, over the summer, where Jesus went with you. It's a simple way for us each to remember that Jesus goes with us everywhere. And Jesus' love is always with us. Thanks be to God.

Amen.