

John 15:9-17

"As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love. 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. I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete. **This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you.** No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends. You are my friends if you do what I command you. 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. **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. I am giving you these commands so that you may love one another."

Let us pray.

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts and minds be acceptable to you O God, our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

Recently I was having a conversation with Rev. Fred Young from Christ UCC in Elizabethtown. Rev. Young is also an associate pastor and preaches once a month as I do. As our conversation went to preaching, he commented that he finds himself preaching on the same theme almost every time. The lectionary readings on his Sundays tend to focus on the nature of God, and I noted that mine tend to focus on love and unity. As we were planning this worship service, Cindy and I found that we were thinking of hymns and songs that I often choose reinforcing that the same themes seem to come up

on my preaching weeks.

So here we are with the issue of love and unity again.

As I looked more closely at this our Gospel lesson this morning, it is one small part of a larger narrative that begins in chapter 13. This is John's narrative in the upper room on Maundy Thursday and is part of Jesus' final instructions to his disciples.

In fact this morning's verses are a paraphrase or reiteration of Chapter 13: 34-35 which reads:

“A new command I give to you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another.”

The fact that Jesus repeats the commandment emphasizes its importance.

We are to live in a spirit of love –

Love for one another – Love for creation – Love for God.

This living in love places us in relationship with one another, creation and God.

Our role is then to recognize these relationships and honor them.

When I look at our world,

I question how well we are doing.

Let's pause for a moment to do a report card in our minds.

How well do you think the world is doing on loving each other?

How well do you think our community is doing on loving each other?

How well do you think we are doing on loving each other?

I recognize that we may have very different opinions  
and I speak only for myself.

But I would not rate our world very highly.

It seems that we respond the best  
during times of natural devastation –  
tsunamis, earthquakes, and hurricanes.

I believe there are very good organizations in the world  
who are doing the best they can to help countries in conflict.

I applaud China for sending surgical masks to Mexico  
as they knew from the SARS epidemic the other year  
far better than others

how important the masks were to containing the outbreak.

But I believe there have been plenty of times  
when the world has turned a blind eye  
to genocide and a cold heart to famine.

Within our community,

I see us rallying beside the family of Ciara  
who was killed in the drive by shooting in York.

I see candle vigils to memorialize important and devastating events  
within the community.

I see ecumenical cooperation through programs  
such as the Lancaster County Council of Churches  
to support people going through trying times.

We are a community who believes in feeding its people.

But I wonder how well we know our neighbors.

I don't know mine very well

because I am not home that often  
to interact and socialize with them.  
So I wonder how many others feel as I do –  
a bit distant, even a bit guarded in what I say with my neighbors.

How about within this congregation?

We certainly have great fellowship times  
in this building and at Rader Park  
through our events like the coffee fellowship,  
the Christmas bazaar, garage sale, chicken Bar-B-Q,  
educational classes and forums,  
environmental and peace programs.

During the morning greeting in worship,  
people appear to be happy and willing to greet each other.

But how often do we speak quickly or harshly  
without considering the other's feelings?

How often do our egos and our self-centeredness  
guide our thoughts and actions?

I believe this will be a challenge for us next week  
when someone may be sitting in our favorite seat  
as we come to worship.

Will we ask them to move or quietly find another seat,  
recognizing that a slightly different perspective  
may help us find a greater appreciation for the worship service.

As we evaluate how we love one another,  
we can also look back at the scriptures to hear God's words,  
and for me there were two significant passages.

In Psalm 98:3 we read

“He remembered his love and faithfulness to the house of Israel.”

And in 1 John 5:2

“By this we know that we love the children of God, when we love God and obey his commandments.”

As I studied this,

I am struck that first I am to remember to love

because God remembers to love us

and that then I am to love since I am loved by God.

And secondly my love for Christ is only real

if I also obey his commandments and love his creation.

Henri Nouwen is quoted as saying

we're called to "love Jesus, and love the way Jesus loved."

In his book, *In the Name of Jesus*,

Nouwen provides a lens through which to read this passage:

"Knowing the heart of Jesus and loving him are the same thing."

"The mystery of ministry

is that we have been chosen

to make our own limited and very conditional love

the gateway for the unlimited and unconditional love of God."

Theologian Paul Tillich's classic book *Love, Power, and Justice*

put it this way:

“Love is the drive toward the unity of the separated.

Reunion presupposes separation

of that which belongs essentially together.”

Today we are given the most simplistic

and yet most difficult commandment: to love one another

Remembering the disciples in the upper room,  
Michaela Bruzzese comments

“Their challenge was—as ours is now—  
to know God's love for them so profoundly  
that they could also love one another—  
and "outsiders"—as fully and deeply as Jesus did.”

So we are to ask ourselves about every decision  
and choice and plan and vision:

Is this rooted in love?

Does this bear fruit for the kingdom of God?

That's the true test.

Carmelo Alvarez reminds us that "communion, or koinonia,  
includes the sharing of human resources, material goods,  
and communal fellowship ...

a commitment of solidarity toward unity  
as a witness in a broken and divided world."

Alvarez challenges churches to live out this text  
by "strengthening communities of solidarity, affirming diversity,  
promoting healthy relationships in families and communities,  
embracing strangers,  
and promoting intercultural and interreligious dialogues."

So how do we accomplish this?

I believe we do this by promoting relationships –  
specifically our relationships with each other,  
with creation and with God.

As I think of our relationships with each other,  
I am drawn back to my conversation with Rev. Young.  
That conversation took place over dinner at a restaurant.  
When I looked at my check at the end of our time together,  
I realized the waitress had neglected to charge me for my soup.  
When I brought this to her attention,  
she appeared embarrassed and said not to worry about it,  
but I insisted that she charge me for the soup which I had consumed.  
This brought strange looks from the tables near us,  
but in this way,  
I was showing my love for her so she would not be reprimanded  
and this establishment so it would not lose money.  
When I think of how we show our love in relationship to creation,  
I recall the Good Drive cleanup day  
and the time and effort in tending to the church  
and Rader Park grounds.  
It is my hope that we recognize God's love for all creation  
and each does our part to keep it clean and safe for plants and animals.

When I think of how we relate to each other as a congregation,  
I have had many members who have gone through health crises  
who have received wonderful care and prayers from this community.  
This weekend I experienced the care, growth and fellowship  
between the women who attended the Women's retreat  
at the youth center.

I have seen us support one another and our community  
by serving breakfasts at First Reformed and dinners at Crispus Attucks.  
As for our love of God,

that is what brings us here.

It is our love of God that calls us to sing a new song,  
to praise God for all the blessings we have received,  
and to allow God to speak and work through us.

It is this love which fills our heart  
with the love we can share with our spouses,  
partners and family members.

It is our love for God that fills our life with love, joy and peace  
and calls on us to share this love with others.

Our love for God calls us to tell others  
how our lives are changed, transformed by our relationship with God.

It is this love for God  
that calls us to invite others to join us here  
and work with us towards God's kingdom.

May we all be filled with this love today and always. Amen.