

Love is the Answer

A sermon preached by the Rev. J. Thomas Buchanan on May 9, 2021

Friendship Presbyterian Church

[Continuation of last week]

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.

(John 15:9-17, NRSV)

There's a story of a clever teenaged student taking a math exam but up against a math problem that he just couldn't solve. And so, hoping against hope that the teacher would have mercy (and maybe a sense of humor), he wrote in the space, "LOVE IS THE ANSWER."

But not to be outdone, the teacher had a great comeback when grading the tests. The student got his paper back and looked to that question to see if the teacher had given him credit for it. And there he saw it, in red marker, right underneath his clever "Love is the Answer" answer:

"It is indeed, but not to this question" 😊

Love is the answer. When I hear a phrase like that, my mind goes to a place of some great popular music. Now I may be a child of the 80's, but the first music that I really remember hearing is from the "peace and love" generation of the late 60's and early 70's –

All you need is love ...

Put a little love in your heart ... and the world could be a better place ...

If I had a hammer ... I'd hammer out love between my brothers and my sisters, all over this land ...

Come on, people now, smile on your brother, everybody get together, try to love one another right now ...

Good stuff, huh? The music's great and the message is too. Might even make you believe for a little while that love IS the answer!

Of course, anyone who has lived more than about two minutes in the real world knows that all this “loving one another” business is a vastly easier thing to do in theory than in practice. It sounds nice, but up against the hard realities of the world, of life in society and community – shoot, life with those we really *do* love, for that matter! – There’s nothing *simple* about it.

We can struggle enough with even *liking* people, but *loving* them? Maybe we should leave all that talk to the Flower Power people and get on with being real.

And yet, the Bible seems to talk about Love all the time. As we’ve seen, there’s an entire chapter dedicated to it, insuring that at least one scripture is read at every wedding there is. And on top of all this, Jesus himself has something to say about it. In fact, he **COMMANDS** it: “This is my *commandment*, that you love one another ...”

Which may raise a fair question in our minds: How can something like Love ... as much as we may *want* to feel it for everyone, as nice as that might be ... how can something like Love be *commanded*? I can no more make myself *feel* Love for someone or something than I can make myself sneeze. And even if I could *make* myself sort of sneeze, it would be an artificial sneeze – a made-up sneeze – not a real sneeze!

But of course, that’s not what Jesus or scripture as a whole is talking about. It’s not talking about us pretending to have – or about commanding us to have – feelings that we simply don’t have.

As the writer Frederick Buechner observed,

... In the Christian sense, love is not primarily an emotion, but an act of the will. When Jesus tells us to love our neighbors, he is not telling us to love them in the sense of responding to them with a cozy emotional feeling ... On the contrary, he is telling us to love our neighbors in the sense of being willing to work for their well-being even if it means sacrificing our own well-being to that end ...” [Wishful Thinking, p. 54]

The Apostle Paul would heartily agree. His famous Love chapter in I Corinthians – I Corinthians 13 – is widely beloved and often read as if it were a poetic rhapsody on the glories of blissful Love. “Faith, Hope, and Love abide, these three, but the greatest of these is Love” (v. 13). For this reason, it’s the most popular, most-read scripture passage at Christian weddings ... perfect for weddings in a way like Psalm 23 is for funerals. And why not? What is a wedding about, if not about the Love the partners in a couple feel for each other?

Now as one who is a minister and who is himself married, and has been for 15 years this month, I can say without the slightest doubt that this “Love” chapter is the very best, most appropriate reading for a wedding. But it is the best for reasons other than what we might imagine.

For you see, the passage is not actually about loving feelings at all. The original context is that of a 1st century church conflict, where one group in a congregation argues its superiority, its rightness, over and against another group which makes the same claims for itself. These people

in this church in Corinth are all supposed to be Christians, followers of Jesus, and yet, they snipe at each other and tear one another down. Each faction claims that it's more spiritually gifted than the others, and looks down on the others.

It is into this mess that the Apostle Paul steps in. He claims that Love is infinitely more important than any giftedness we have ... anything we may think we have on another. If we don't have Love – that is, if we don't share it and live it – then we're nothing. Love is so much more than a feeling ... it is an entire life defined by the patient art of self-surrender:

Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice in wrong-doing but rejoices in the truth. It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things (vv. 4-7).

And so you see, it's actually perfect for a wedding. It speaks of action, rather than mere feeling ... it speaks of sacrifice, rather than selfishness ... it speaks of covenant, rather than convenience. There's a sacred depth to these words ... a depth that a couple can spend a lifetime together discovering and living into.

And yes, that's hard too. But it's not Jesus commanding us to *feel* something that we just may not feel. It's him calling us to *do* something that we may or may not feel like doing.

The truth is, our faith calls us to many things which are hard, and may sometimes feel impossible ... God is funny that way. But as we answer the call to love, as we struggle to work it out, side-by-side with fellow disciples who find it as difficult as we do, something can happen, by the grace of God: The call of a lifetime can become the time of our lives.

This process is not necessarily neat. Sometimes it means *loving* people – showing kindness to people, seeking the good of other people – without necessarily liking them. And as Buechner, again, observes,

In fact, sometimes liking them may stand in the way of loving them by making us overprotective sentimentalists instead of reasonably honest friends. This does not mean that liking may not be a part of loving, only that it doesn't have to be. Sometimes liking follows on the heels of loving. It is hard to work for people's well-being very long without coming in the end to rather like them too. [Wishful Thinking, p. 54]

And God *is* playing the long game. God has a passion for forging bonds of love between fellow disciples, fellow strugglers ... in the midst of a divided Church, a divided world ... which are stronger than anything that can divide us, for in this love and service towards one another, we get our minds off who's right and who's wrong, who's to blame and who is not, and into a *fellowship*, a shared taste of the love of God which would dissolve every barrier we put up between ourselves.

And so, you see, in the end, Love *is* the answer. It's not simple, it's not always nice or cozy, and it probably won't get you full credit on a math test, but it *is* the answer, for –

Love never ends. But as for prophecies, they will come to an end; as for tongues, they will cease; as for knowledge, it will come to an end. For we know only in part, and we prophesy only in part; but when the complete comes, the partial will come to an end. When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child; when I became an adult, I put an end to childish ways. For now, we see in a mirror, dimly, but then we will see face to face. Now I know only in part; then I will know fully, even as I have been fully known. And now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love. (I Corinthians 13:8-13, NRSV)

To the glory of God! Amen.