

SERMON, May 19, 2019

“I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.”

Do we have love for one another?

Tevye, in *Fiddler on the Roof*, the 1964 Broadway musical (with music by Jerry Bock, and lyrics by Sheldon Harnick) asks his wife, Golde, “Do you love me?”

Tevye: Golde, I'm asking you a question. Do you love me?

Golde: You're a fool!

Tevye: I know. But do you love me?

Golde: Do I love you?

For twenty-five years, I've washed your clothes,

Cooked your meals, cleaned your house,

Given you children, milked your cow.

After twenty-five years, why talk about love right now? ...

Tevye: ...My father and my mother said ***we'd learn to*** love each other.

So, now I'm asking, Golde... Do you love me?

Golde: I'm your wife!

Tevye: I know. But do you love me?

Golde: Do I love him?

For twenty-five years, I've lived with him,

Fought with him, starved with him.

For twenty-five years, my bed is his.

If that's not love, what is?

Tevye: Then you love me?

Golde: I suppose I do.

Tevye: And I suppose I love you, too.

And they sing, together: It doesn't change a thing, but even so,

After twenty-five years, it's nice to know.

Do we have love for one another?

Elena Helms expresses a simple version in two lines of poetry:

“Do you love me, or do you not?

You told me once, but I forgot...”

Do we have love for one another?

Julie Andrews, as Eliza Doolittle, in *My Fair Lady*, has had more than enough of talking about love. She rails at her suitor:

Don't talk of love., Lasting through time, Make me no undying vow:
Show me now!

Sing me no song, Read me no rhyme, Don't waste my time:
Show me!

Don't talk of June, Don't talk of fall, Don't talk at all,
Show me!

And we need not look too hard through Jesus' teaching that the love he directs is love in action. Christ's love is demonstrated in deliberate, consistent, and generous acts of compassion and kindness toward people who deserve it... and toward people who do not deserve it. Love of this kind, always acknowledging the presence and the importance of the other, is the defining trait by which the followers of Jesus will be identified.

In the New Testament gospel narratives, and in the epistles, we see what Jesus's earliest followers understood him to mean when he spoke of love. They used the Greek word, *agape*, whenever speaking of God's love, and whenever Jesus' care for the disciples and the world is mentioned. It frequently is translated as unconditional love, or self-giving love, or simply God's love toward us. We can do a bit better by distilling the whole story of Christ's life and teaching among us and for us into this operative definition: God's love is unconquerable benevolence. God's love is the invincible determination to foster our well-being and joy... God's love is intended to catapult us out of our self-absorption. It is disclosed to us so that we may have genuine, vibrant life, and that in abundance! God wants for our lives to work as they are designed to work. God wants for us, who have known him in Christ, and in the Holy Spirit, to have such a fruitful and good experience of life together that everyone who looks at us from the outside notices its distinctive quality. Jesus tells us that we must abide in his love for us, and demonstrate that love for one another by keeping his commandments. The world then will wonder where we get this wholesome integrity, such buoyant joy, such humble and honest recognition of our own shortcomings, self-mastery, mutual trust and attentive care for every member of the community, and consistent power to do good.

That's a pretty tall order, isn't it?

Do we have love for one another?

Do we know the names of the people who worship God next to us in the pews week after week?

"It's a whole new game, once I learn your name;

For that little labor makes you my neighbor.”

Let’s look at what this distinctively Christian love is not. It is not the natural favor, attentiveness, and affection that we show to immediate family members, if and when their behavior pleases us. And it is not the reciprocal kindness that we show to those who treat us well. Jesus is explicit that we should not pat ourselves on the backs, saying, “Look! I’m a really loving person when I choose to be!” In the Sermon on the Mount, speaking of godly love, he says: “If you love those who love you, what reward will you get? Are not even the tax collectors doing that? And if you greet only your own people, what are you doing more than others? Do not even pagans do that?”

More to the point, he directs us to love in the same invincibly attentive way as God does, he says, “You have heard that it was said, ‘Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ But I tell you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be children of your Father in heaven.”

Obviously, we don’t feel affectionate favor and warmth toward any enemy, or toward anyone who is persecuting us. We aren’t taught to do that. We are taught to have the same disposition toward them that God does. We are to want their lives to work. We are to share with God the invincible determination to want their genuine well-being and fulfillment---not has hostile antagonists, but as those who have yet to learn the way to live together peaceably, in God’s true fellowship and service. And so we are directed to pray for them, that God will give them better hearts and minds... We are directed to forgive—that is to let go of our rehearsal and condemnation of their horrid behavior, because we, too, stand in need of forgiveness. “As we forgives those who sin against us...” We pray that our offenders will, somehow, sometime, find true peace, joy, love and fulfillment in life. That is the nature of agape, of God’s loving kindness.

We might think, “I serve on the governing board of the club; and I was always elected to class office in school. That’s pretty good evidence of an affable personality. We do best when we stay in our comfort zone, alongside people like us.” Jesus invites us to walk a little further with him. Samaritans; tax collectors; harlots; sinners. Total strangers with whom he had nothing in common but being made in the image of God. And how do we square our claim to staying in our comfort zone alongside the directive, “take up your cross daily, and follow me?”

St. Paul’s first letter to the Christians in Corinth goes into detail describing godly love at work among those who share in Christ’s nature, having given their lives over in allegiance and submission to him. Here is the expanded domestic version:

Love is patient, even when your first explanation of the problem doesn’t get through to the other; even with cranky, over-tired children.

Love is kind, even when your spouse is distracted or self-absorbed, and hasn’t yet asked you about your day.

Love does not envy, because she knows that the greatest treasures of the cosmos have already been given to her;

Love does not boast, because God's love doesn't need to prove its supreme worth;
Love is not proud, as a loving child of God knows that every good gift comes from above, and can not be earned.

Love does not dishonor others, because life is not a competition to dominate others, but a journey through redemption toward being more, and better than, we could have hoped to be.
Love is not self-seeking, but trusts that when God's will is done, everyone gets whatever they need.

Love is not easily angered, because love is a deeper and more formidable power than momentary passion. And our anger at others almost never brings about the righteousness that God desires.

Love keeps no record of wrongs, because the goal of conflict resolution is not blame and shame, but a new start, reconciliation, freedom, and clean hearts.

Love does not delight in evil—that is, in finding a flaw in the other's character that may be exploited and condemned—but rejoices with the truth: that in Christ, old things have passed away, and we all are beloved new creatures.

Love always protects another's dignity...

Love always trusts that God's way of love and redemption can carry the day.

Love always hopes, because that is love's natural buoyant, upward momentum, as distinct from cynicism or fear.

Love always perseveres in extending good will toward others, even when their flaws are obvious. God's objective for us is not to win control over one another, but for each of us swept into the living, transformative, healing currents of God's nature and purpose. We never stop wanting that outcome, regardless of others' self-defeating choices.

When I consider this kind of Christly love, and see how meager my home-grown impulses are by comparison, it helps me understand why Christ tells us that ***we'll need his help to love as God wills for us to love.*** It helps me understand why he prefaces his imperative to love others with the phrase, "as I have loved you." As I have not quit, or walked away when you have frustrated me. As I have persisted with you until you've gotten it. As I have forgiven your mis-steps and put you back on course. As I have served you. As I have healed you and helped you become what God intends you to be. As I have not given you what you asked for, but what you needed. As I have given my life away so that you might keep yours...

so, you also should love one another.

Let's do this thing!

And as we do, the world will know that Christ is alive and well among us, and is able to bring any and every trusting soul into God's loving presence.