

“Making a Living of Loving”

John 15:9-17 (NRSV)

The message is simple today: until we fully love others we will not fully know God’s love. I’m sure my sermon is going to make this simple message way more complicated than it needs to be, but I’m in good company because Jesus took four chapters in John’s Gospel to explain it. Those four chapters are called Jesus’ Farewell Discourse (John 14-17) and today’s text falls right in the middle of it.

It may seem a bit odd in this Easter Season to be jumping back in time to the speech Jesus gave the night before he was killed. But when you think about it, perhaps the people who created the lectionary (that is, those who chose the lections of texts that go with each Sunday in the church year) did, in fact, have a method to their madness. They seem to be drawing us to the very thing that we are often drawn to after someone we love dies – their final words, their final days, their last acts, or (if it was not a sudden death but rather an expected one) their legacy.

Whether or not Jesus actually made this four chapters long

speech all in the night before he was crucified, or whether John was merely combining some of the greatest and lasting lessons that Jesus taught and placing them around the pivotal event of the last supper – we do not know. But the end result is that Jesus’ Farewell Discourse contains it all: the professor’s last lecture of the semester, the parent’s words of warning as they hand the keys over to their teenager for their first drive, the coach’s pep talk before the big game, and the chaplain’s words of comfort at the end of life. That is to say, it’s an emotional rollercoaster, full of wisdom and warning both.

Generally speaking, Jesus’ Farewell Discourse has three major components:

First, Jesus tells the disciples that he will be going away to the God Father, but that it’s okay because he will send the Holy Spirit to guide them. Jesus bestows peace on the disciples and commands them to love one another. The expression of the unity of love between Jesus and his Father, in the Spirit, as it applies to his

disciples in the love of Christ, is a key theme, reiterated several times by repeating the New Commandment: *"love one another as I have loved you."*

The next part of the discourse contains the allegory of The Vine which positions Jesus as the vine (the source of life for the world) and the disciples as the branches, building on the pattern of discipleship in the gospels. The Vine again emphasizes the love among the disciples, but Jesus then warns the disciples of upcoming persecutions: *"If the world hates you, remember that they hated me before you...In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world."* (John 16:33) Jesus never said life would be easy. In fact multiple times he mentions just how hard it will be! This is good to remember when *we* suffer hard times, lest we believe that God is *causing* our hard time. No – God is not causing it; hard times are truly part of life – even and especially the life of faith.

In the final part of the discourse (John 17:1-26) Jesus prays for his followers. This is the longest prayer of Jesus in any of the gospels and the key themes of the prayer are the glorification of God

the Father and his pleas for the unity of the disciples through love. Jesus prays to the Father that his followers *"may all be one as we are one"* and that *"the love with which you love me may be in them, and I in them."*¹ By the length of his prayer it's almost as if Jesus is worried that we're going to struggle with this love thing! (imagine that!)

Essentially – Jesus is saying: God loves you. God is with you. You know this because I've been with you and you know that I love you. I've shown you. And you see the love that God and I share. That same love is for you too. So live like that is true. Whether I'm physically with you or not – live like it my love is alive and it will always be alive. In the end – after all the miracles and all the healings, after all the cryptic messages and all the scriptural interpretations, after all the dinners with sinners and conversations with controversial folks, after all the parables and preaching and prayer, after all the sowing of fields, fishing for people, and multiplying of loaves – in the end, really, "All You Need is Love." Jesus said it before John Lennon did.

¹ Sections summarized in *Farwell Discourse* at https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Farewell_Discourse (6 May 2018).

But while “needing love” is one thing... “abiding in love” is a whole other reality. We all know that we need love and we need to love. But needs can go fulfilled or unfilled. “Abiding in love” leaves no room for the theoretical. It’s an action, not a wish or desire. To abide means to reside. To live. To remain. It is an all-encompassing and all-consuming term. You can’t have one foot in and one foot out when you abide. You have to be all in. 100%.

There’s such a drastic difference when you’re “*heck yeah, 100% sign me up; all in*” and when you’re just “*eh, kinda sorta ‘sure why not’ halfway in*” isn’t there? Usually when you’re “all in” with something you’re doing it because *you* want to or because it excites you. But when you’re only “halfway in” with something you’re probably doing it because *somebody else* asked you to do it or you feel obligated to. And it’s pretty easy to tell when somebody is 100% in and when someone’s not. Nadou Lawson? 100% in to hospitality and making sure our coffee is hot, the napkins are out, and the kitchen is clean...and all with a smile on her face. Bill Ponikvar? 100% in to greeting and making sure guests are welcome, nametags are made, people are connected, and transportation is arranged. As for those who aren’t

“all in” I won’t give you examples; I’m sure you can think of plenty of your own, even in your own life.

Sometimes it’s completely okay to be “halfway in”...in fact, a lot of things in life we’re probably “halfway in” – we do it because it needs to get done. But the point of Jesus’ message is that when it comes God’s love there is no “half in” – that’s not an option – because God’s love only knows how to function as “all in.” God will always be loving us unconditionally and irrationally. This is the definition of grace...that we don’t do anything to deserve God’s love...we just have it...and we can’t do anything to stop God from loving us...it’s an irreversible love that makes no sense and that can be downright frustrating if you’re the type of person who likes to think that ‘being good’ gives you an upper hand with God. Whether criminal or Christian or both – God loves us all.

But God’s love can be present in our lives without us “abiding in it.” Living in it. Residing in it. I like how Eugene Peterson puts verse nine in *The Message*. He writes, “*Make yourself at home in God’s love,*” (John 15:9). Making ourselves at home implies time and effort...and it implies that we are going to stay a while!

To “receive God’s love” is just to be a branch attached to the tree trunk. To “abide in God’s love” is to be a branch connected to the tree trunk all the way down to the root system, taking in nutrients from water, sun, and soil, and bearing fruit. Bearing fruit is the distinguishing mark of one who has gone from receiving God’s love to abiding in it, or living in it. Bearing fruit is what shows that you’re “all in.”

And the fruit that proclaims to the world that you are “abiding in God’s love” is how we keep God’s commandments, which Jesus says repeatedly in this farewell discourse, is simply about loving other people as much as he has loved us. Jesus says it so plainly in verse 17 that it’s almost comical: *“I am giving you this command (love one another) so that you may love one another.”* As opposed to saying, “I am giving you this command to love one another so that you can cross-stitch in on a pillow, slap it on a bumper sticker, or sing about it in a hymn. Loving others is not so that God can feel our love, but so that the world can feel our love, and in turn, God’s love.

¹ Richard Rohr, *Intimacy: The Divine Ambush*, disc 2 (Center for Action and Contemplation: 2013). Richard

How we love others matters. Because how we love reflects how others see God. How can God’s love be known in a world where we talk about the nice-i-ties of love more than we actually practice the messy-ness of it? When we do this, we are masking God’s love instead of mirroring it.

“The mirror, according to Zen masters, is without ego and without mind. Everything is revealed as it really is [in a mirror]. There is no discrimination [or judgment] on the part of the mirror. If something comes, the mirror reflects it; if the object moves on, the mirror lets it move on. The mirror is always empty of itself and therefore able to receive the other. The mirror has no pre-conditions for entry or acceptance. It receives and reflects back what is there [before it. Nothing goes unseen before a mirror].²

“If we are to be a continuation of God’s way of seeing, we must, first of all, be mirrors.”³ We must be able to see others for themselves without projecting ourselves onto them. And when we truly see another – in all their complexity...we see Christ...who loves them, and us, unconditionally and completely.

Rohr, *Essential Teachings on Love* (Orbis Books: 2018), 134-135. Accessed on 6 May 2018 at

² Rohr, *ibid.*

When we are able to see all people as a reflection of Christ then we can begin to love them because we're loving the Christ in them. And when we love them, we are then abiding in God's love. Because God's love is not just for us and people like us, it is for all people, and especially people who we think are nothing like us. I like to think of it this way: what am I missing about God when I choose not to see someone or when I walk past someone and don't engage with them or when I talk to someone but don't really listen? What about God am I not seeing and learning because I am not seeing and learning from this person?

One of the most effective teachers of this "seeing" was liberation theologian and professor at Union Theological Seminary, Rev. Dr. James Cone, who died a week ago yesterday. Cone was a powerful theological and political voice throughout his entire 50-year career, and he changed the landscape of theological discourse by resolutely insisting that we cannot do the work of Christ without addressing justice claims and privileging the oppressed.

¹ Amy Butler, "James Cone and becoming black with God," *Baptist News Global* (1 May 2018), accessed on May 6, 2018

Dr. Cone's pastor at Riverside Baptist Church, Rev. Dr. Amy Butler says, "While he was always kind and open, he also was always unrelenting...In his lovely, gentle way, he was professionally pissed off, never fully comprehending how anyone could ever imagine a God who was not an advocate for the oppressed. Always. He is famous for writing, *"We must become black with God,"* which was not so much a comment on phenotypes and skin color but rather an unyielding declaration of the truth that God is always, always on the side of the oppressed.⁴ And inferring that at any given time, whoever is oppressed is who is reflecting God most fully to us.

Cone goes on to say, *"To receive God's revelation is to become black with God by joining God in the work of liberation."*⁵ To join the work of liberation is to realize that God is not made in our image; we are made in God's image...which means each and every person reflects the divine and is worthy of divine love. Or as Benjamin Elijah Mays says, *"The love of God and the love of humanity are one love."*

at <https://baptistnews.com/article/james-cone-and-becoming-black-with-god/#.Wu4ZPtMvzOR>.

¹ Butler, *ibid.*

Unfortunately, we often think of “abiding in God’s love” just in terms of ourselves. *“Jesus loves me this I know for the Bible tells me so.”* I’m not saying that accepting Jesus’ love is easy...because realizing that we are worthy of God’s love and grace (no strings attached) is a lifetime journey.

The irony is – precisely what Cone and Mays are saying – seeing God’s image in others and loving them as Christ themselves – which is a hard thing to do, *is actually the path* to accepting God’s love for ourselves. We can’t understand God until we understand God loves everyone and we can’t fully love God until we love more fully “the everyone” that God loves.

I know that all may sound confusing, but essentially Jesus is saying that God is known in relationships, and we will forever have a limited or distorted vision of God if we are only in relationships with people like us or who we already know. How many of Jesus’ encounters in the gospels are with people he already knew? Most of them are with strangers!

In reading about my sermon in the newsletter this week, Calvary member and retired American Baptist pastor Glenn Hill sent me this quote from a favorite book of

his, *Herein Is Love*, by Reuel L. Howe: *“We are meant to be to our generation what Jesus was to His: an incarnation of the redemptive love of God.”* Glenn says, *“The challenge of those words stays with me to this day. In a sense, they have become my lodestar (guiding star). I fail so many times to honor the admonition but I have never questioned its veracity. For me, it encapsulates what Christian (i.e., Christ-like) living is all about. So I keep on trying.”*

Glenn is 94 years old. And if he can keep on trying, then we can too! And so we do. We keep on trying **to make a living by loving.**

We make a living of loving when we recognize that we don’t have all the answers and we listen to another perspective.

We make a living of loving when we set aside our concern of what other people think about us and put first the concerns of other people and what they think.

We make a living of loving when we give our money to the ministries of God, ensuring that the gospel message is being proclaimed more loudly than the consumer commercials.

We make a living of loving when we forgive ourselves for missing the mark in what we said or did today, and when we believe the truth that we have a new opportunity to start over right now.

We make a living of loving when we stop to give thanks every time we want to stop and complain.

We make a living of loving when we lift up the gifts of others and use the gifts God has given us.

We make a living of loving when we visit the home of someone who cannot leave their home.

We make a living of loving when we call out injustices with our voices and votes instead of feeling resigned that nothing will change and we can't make a difference.

We make a living of loving when we admit and accept that we have biases and prejudices and become aware that we can slowly change them by practicing new ways of thinking, speaking, listening, and acting in the world.

We make a living of loving when we take care of ourselves as much as we care for the ones in our families.

We make a living of loving when we apologize and say "I messed

up, will you forgive me?" and when we accept another's apology and say, "I forgive you."

We make a living of loving when we choose to spend some of our precious time serving others who are precious to God but whose lives, for whatever reason, are in a precarious place right now.

How do you make a living of loving?

It doesn't come through some grand strategic plan. It comes one action, one person at a time. You don't need a college degree for it or "previous experience" or "special skills;" you just need an open heart and willing spirit to make a living by loving. And you'll never run out of things to do because the job will never be done. It's guaranteed employment! And the pay is having a fuller experience of God and God's love and being a key change-agent in bringing about God's kin-dom.

The beautiful thing about Jesus' Farewell Discourse is that he gives us a commandment to love one another, but a prescription for how to do it. The "what" part is clear: love others. The "how" part is up to us and the needs we see before us today, and the gifts God has uniquely given us to meet those needs.

This is not a new message, I know. It's a simple sermon: allow God to love you – fully and completely as you are...and challenge yourself to love others – as fully and completely as God does. It's a reciprocal relationship. In being loved, we gain strength and resilience to love others. In loving others we experience humility and learn who Christ is which allows us to receive God's love more fully.

Faith is relational, because God came in human form to build relationships. And we're called to be "all in" – 100%. That doesn't mean we'll get it right 100% of the time. Not at all. To make a living by loving is not to never mess up. It's not a state of perfection, it's a steady practice. We love over and over and over again, and in doing so we learn what it means to really live.

"Love one another as I have loved you."

These are words to live by, so much so, that Jesus said them as he himself was dying. Love became his legacy because it was first and foremost his life.

Will it be yours?

Amen.