

Sermon for the Seventeenth Sunday After Pentecost

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I've been thinking a lot lately about love. Love's a funny thing, you know? It dominates a lot of what we encounter, especially things like the music industry and film. If you flip on the radio, how many songs out of ten are gonna be about love? On the surface, I'd wager nine and a half of 'em. And movies? Even silly action movies are going to have some wedged-in love interest subplot. Thing is, for most of that pop-culture representation of love, it's almost never actual love, or at least, not long-haul, time and life tested love. At best, it's that love that still hangs out in the infatuation stage, or maybe it's a sort of general sense of "family," or maybe it's really just lust masquerading as something deeper. But you know what you don't get much? You don't get a lot of songs or movies about what love feels like when you've been together for a while. I recently got sucked down the YouTube suggested videos blackhole and ended up on a Eurovision Song Contest entry from Iceland - I know, I'd probably been playing around on the internet way too long to end up there. But I landed on this entry from a guy named Dadi Freyr and his song "10 Years."

(<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ORDK1XQToAY>) It's one of those rare songs that shifts the focus of love away from the lovesick early days to the comfort of love a decade in. It's a great song, and surprisingly fun and dorky all at the same time. But it's rare. It sticks out because you just don't hear that part of love talked about. And that's a shame. Our fairy tales end with "happily ever after," an unrealistic expectation for any relationship. Even the best have hiccups along the way, and few are the best. We need better descriptions of love, not only so we know what to expect when it's healthy, but also what to expect when it's not.

I had a professor in seminary who used to get all up in arms about love, about Christian love. He'd rant and rave about how Christians didn't invent love, so stop trying to claim that you can't have love without Jesus. The world has love. We don't get to claim copyright on that one. But what we do get to do is define what makes Christian love unique. For one thing, Christian love absolutely can be like that infatuation found in pop culture, but it always leads to a deeper place. All the Gospels have Jesus naming love as a commandment, sometimes his only commandment (like in John) or sometimes the second only behind embracing God. Love God, love your neighbor. Love your enemy. Love one another. That doesn't leave much of the world unloved.

Love God - well, that's pretty straightforward, right? There's this idea that many of us have seen called "the zeal of the convert." It's basically how amazingly excited people brand-new to our faith get to be. It's basically the infatuation stage of love. To steal a phrase from our more evangelical cousins, they're on fire for God. Yay! But the mature version of loving God rests in God's being, a sort of no-frills release of one's self into the fullness of what God is. There's something sort of Zen but also deeply affected by this love. The Psalms say this comes with following God's commandments. Jesus says it's there when you "abide in me." Abide in God, live in the trust and the comfort of God's embrace.

Love your neighbor - that used to be much easier to define, as "neighbor" was really just those folks you'd run into in your day-to-day, the folks across the street, the mail carrier, the shopkeeper, and so on. But with the reach of the internet, we run into people much further afield. The concept of neighbor has grown, and in spite of the many failings of social media, I think this is a net good for us. We have the opportunity and the challenge to love people we may never have even thought of before, recognizing their humanity by even recognizing they exist at all, and then loving that humanity.

Love your enemy - tough stuff, this one, and hard. I think it's a glorious nuance that our scripture doesn't tell us not to have enemies, but that we should love the ones we do have. Woah. I mean, maybe there's something about loving an enemy that can move them from one category to another, maybe becoming neighbors in time. But that we are to love them regardless of which of those categories they fall into, that's

earth-shattering stuff. It's respecting their dignity and extending love in spite of difference, even severe difference. This is the stuff of Christmas celebrations in World War I trenches across enemy lines. It's humanity and a recognition of the createdness shared by all, in spite of the many disagreements we're capable of. And to reiterate, it's hard.

Love one another - this one only shows up in John, and for me, it's fascinating given their context. See, when John was written, anyone who believed that Jesus was the Way had been kicked out of their religious organizations. They'd been exiled, separated from family and home and familiar places. They lived far from the city alone in shelters hewn out of desert cliffs on the banks of the Dead Sea. Everyone there had been told home was no longer home. And this was done under the auspices of love. It's like those dreaded phrases from a parent: "It's for your own good. We do this because we love you. This is going to hurt us more than it hurts you. Until you change, you're not welcome under this roof." For those folks in those caves of exile, surrounded by other people just like them kicked out for loving Christ, Loving God was a given. Loving enemy and loving neighbor were great concepts, but the wounds inflicted by enemies were still fresh and painful every day, and there were no neighbors to speak of in the desert. So they loved who they could, where they were. They loved one another as the chosen family of followers of Christ. To steal a line from RuPaul, "If you can't love yourself, how in the hell are you gonna love anybody else? Can I get an 'amen?'"

It makes me wonder about the many ways love has gotten twisted around in our own day, the many ways Christian love has been used as a cudgel. Inconsistently applied or cherry-picked, love sure can look a lot like hate. In Mark, Jesus pulls a child in as an example, asking us to welcome children in his name. Yes, this is absolutely about cute, cherub-cheeked little ones, but I think it extends to everyone who's vulnerable and in need of loving care in our world. The ones lost, the ones mistreated or damaged or ignored. The ones who consider walking into our doors but just aren't sure enough that if they make it across the threshold they'll find actual love here and not hate in love's clothing. And James, man I'm lovin' James this year, James says this kind of embrace isn't just love, it's wisdom and it's merciful.

Along with these readings we heard today, though, I've been thinking a lot about that way of loving I mentioned a second ago in the Gospel of John. We're deep in John in our Bible Study class, so I suppose it's only natural. But that specific idea of "love one another" that shows up only in that exiled community, it's really gotten to me lately. Because, again, these are people who have been booted out of family, kicked out of the places they love by the people they love over disagreements about the God they love. They have been removed from the community of faith they thought loved them over something that is deeply consequential but also didn't have to be a breaking point. And yet, the hardline made it so.

And it makes me wonder about us. Now, I know a ton of us love St. Thomas' because it's such a sweet and loving community, and it absolutely is. But not that many folks know that we are. We aren't in exile, but we also aren't widely known. We practice a pretty powerful love, a lot like a family with an eye toward the long haul. But I wonder. I wonder what we might look like if we were to take the lay-down-one's-life-for-a-friend kinda love espoused by John and applied it here? More than anything, I'm thinking about the LGBTQIA+ community, a community not terribly unlike the Johannine community. Again, these are people who have been booted out of family, kicked out of the places they love by the people they love over disagreements about who they love. Many have been removed from a community of faith they thought loved them over something that is deeply consequential but also doesn't have to be a breaking point. And yet, the hardline made it so. If you are ever lucky enough to be included in someone's chosen family, you will know an honor of love like no other. To be loved and to love not because of obligation but because there is no one else trusted enough to be brought into that vulnerable place, y'all, a better opportunity for Christian love has never existed.

Have you ever seen those “Free Mom Hugs” shirts in Pride Parades? Basically, mothers have started showing up at Pride events wearing these shirts that just say “Free Mom Hugs” on the front, acknowledging the pain and loss that so many in the parade feel. They’ve lost their families, their parents, and the love that comes with them over who they are, and these moms show up, unrelated but freely offering the same love the ways of the world have stolen away. Now, not everyone in the parade takes ‘em up on the offer, but the joy and the love shown when they do is world-stoppingly beautiful. I wonder what we would be, I wonder what we would look like, who we could welcome in, if we were to approach the broken and outcast with that same kind of love. I don’t know that we need to start wearing “Free Church Hugs” shirts -- though maybe that’s not my worst idea -- but if we lived that, if we modeled a place where we love one another so deeply as to become the St. Thomas’ chosen family, I can’t help but imagine this place bursting with love and energy and the zeal of many, many converts. And yes, for some that will mature into the love of long term commitment, and for others, we’ll merely be a stone on the path, but it’s a path paved by love where only sadness and betrayal had paved the way before.

The Wisdom of Solomon says that for the ungodly, the path of God’s love is “inconvenient and . . . and a burden to us.” If loving those the world has cast aside -- and especially other Christians have cast aside -- if loving them is inconvenient and a burden to us, we’ve got some major soul searching to do. Because God’s mercy is not inconvenient or burdensome. It is sweeter than honey to follow God’s commandment, and there is much relief to be found here. If only we follow that commandment. Love God, love your neighbor. Love your enemy. And love one another.