

Text – John 15:9-17

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

In a perfect world, our Gospel text on Mother's Day would deal with the topic of love – and it does! – though this is far from a perfect world. Ours is a world of hatred and violence, a world of sin and evil – a world where love is often ignored and even suppressed.

And the truth is (though sad to say on Mother's Day!), that not all of us had loving mothers, though it does seem true that most often the role of motherhood seems to engender, encourage, and bring out nurture and loving affection for children (just not in everyone).

But I think many of us assume that love is the easy part of our faith. When the Apostle Paul tells us that love summarizes the law, we may let out a sigh of relief, thinking that we can dispense with all that annoying legalism, and just love everybody.

And when Jesus elevates the love of God and the love of neighbor to the highest commandment, we just assume he has made our ethical lives simpler. We can handle loving one another; we can manage that.

Or maybe not; if we look at ourselves honestly, we see the problems that pop up. We can make love too sentimental. We can think we show love when we cuddle a baby, or take a covered dish to a church dinner.

We can show great love to our family and friends, and to our sisters and brothers in the church, and we can think that we have fulfilled Jesus' call to love. We can pat ourselves on the back because we think we understand true religion and faith when we see them. Showing our faith in Christ just means practicing love, right?

When we try to push things a little deeper, however, then we begin to see how our simple assumptions fall apart. Even within the church, we find showing love harder than we assumed. We may disagree with our sisters and brothers in Christ, finding reconciliation more painful than we wish.

We may have different opinions about worship or social issues, or money matters, and when we do, our easy satisfactions about love just fly out the window. Who can expect us to love people when they think wrong?

If we find love difficult to practice, we might notice that the church has always had problems with love. Throughout its history, the church has put more energy into discussing and even disputing about doctrine than practicing love. And no one should say that doctrine doesn't matter.

Yet the New Testament writers put a lot of effort into convincing us to love one another. The Apostle Paul wrote those beautiful words in 1 Corinthians 13 that we often read at weddings, but which actually apply much more broadly.

John exhorts us so often to love that we almost want to assure him that we get it – we understand. Could we actually assume that we should place at least as much emphasis on love as we do on doctrine?

In our Gospel text for today, Jesus is calling for what may be described as “obedient love.” This is not “romantic love,” involving all the emotions of affection and endearment. And this is not “mutual,” in which we love others who love us back.

This is a love which flows from God through Jesus to us. God’s love both inspires our love and enables our love. When our “love well” dries up, we can then draw on the love God has shown us to love others.

When our teeth still hurt from the kick we received, we can draw on God’s love. When we “abide” in Jesus’ love, we find a supply of love we didn’t know we had. If we have fallen into the trap of thinking that love comes easily, or if we confuse love with sentimentality, some things about this passage burst those bubbles.

This passage comes just after a word from Jesus that helps us understand the kind of love he calls for, and it comes just before another such comment.

Within the passage itself, we find a word that lifts love above the kind of tender, hazy thing for which we may often mistake it. Just after our Gospel passage, Jesus injects an assurance that doesn’t sound sentimental at all.

Jesus reminds the disciples, “If the world hates you, be aware that it hated me before it hated you” (John 15:18). All of the sentimentality about love drains out when we read that. The world has shown its hatred to Jesus on the cross. The world has shown its hatred to the church through the centuries with persecution.

The world continues to show hatred to the church in some parts of the world even today. In some places, Christians lose jobs, or status, or even their lives because of their faith. As our nation grows less religious and more secular, some are now saying that Christian persecution is on the horizon in this nation!

A few verses before our Gospel, Jesus identifies the real problem with showing love. He tells the disciples, “I will no longer talk much with you, for the ruler of this world is coming” (John 14:30). Jesus does not explain in depth what he means by “the ruler of this world.”

Other parts of the New Testament talk about demons, unclean spirits and Satan. With all of these terms, the New Testament writers tell us that we find ourselves in the midst of a serious spiritual battle.

In whatever way we understand these words about Satan, demons and “the ruler of this world,” we can all agree that the evil in the world is tenacious. We draw back in horror at some of the things people do to each other and at some of the troubles we face.

We may not quite understand how the ruler of this world works to influence what goes on in life, but we see that we act as the church in a dangerous, hostile, baffling world.

When we show obedient love, we let loose a spiritual force into this hostile environment. We practice an active, powerful love that takes strength and courage to show.

Within the passage itself, we see both the last nail in the coffin of our sentimentality and a third understanding of love. Jesus laid down his life for us. Jesus went beyond mutual love and obedient love to sacrificial love. Jesus answered the hatred of the world and the influence of the ruler of this world with sacrificial love.

Jesus did not glorify death or suffering, but by facing head on the evil of the world, he lost his life. His sacrifice inspires gratitude from us. We reach out in love to others, not backing down from the hatred of the world. As did Jesus, we trust in God for the resurrection.

We face a world of hate and violence, a world where evil defies our attempts to eradicate it. Jesus came into the darkness of the world to shine the light. As Jesus prepared to leave this world, he gave these words to his disciples. He called them to love one another. We know now that showing this love does not come easily.

Nevertheless, Jesus invited us to abide in his love.

His love becomes the oasis to which we can retreat when the world becomes too much for us. His love becomes the well from which we can draw when our love runs out.

If Jesus' words about love in the midst of evil and hate sound strange, the promise he makes may sound even stranger: "I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete" (John 15:11).

Sandwiched in between Jesus' words about evil and hate we find Jesus' promise of joy. We might find happiness in any number of different things, but we find true joy only in the love of God that comes through Jesus.

Only that joy lifts us up above the trouble in our lives and the trouble in the world so we can abide with God. Jesus does not promise we will receive everything we want when we want it, but Jesus does promise us joy that comes from within.

Let us show love to one another. Let us show a love to one another that is bigger than our differences and even our disagreements! Let us seek the joy that only Jesus can give. Amen.

May the peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus forever. Amen.

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