

1 Sermon, October 27, 2013

Texts: 1 Corinthians 13:1-13, 1 John 3:1-3

Title: "Loving"

1. Church must be a loving sacred space
2. What is this love?
3. God Loves Us
4. We Love Each Other
5. When we experience love, we need to make a loving response.

1. Church must be a loving sacred space

We continue our reflection on faith, hope and love with – you guessed it — love.

As 1 Corinthians 13 says, "the greatest of these is love."

Love is central to who God is. God is love.

It's hard to overemphasize the importance of love in God's way of doing things.

And the Body of Christ – that's us, the church – we're supposed to be all about love.

The church is to provide a sacred space where love is first.

2. What is this love?

But what kind of love are we talking about? There's lots of different things that go by the word love in English.

How do we try to understand this thing called love that is central to who God is, and what God expects of us?

3. God Loves Us

This past Wednesday, I was talking to our Confirmation class about the deep spiritual needs that each of us has. The first spiritual need is to be loved. I asked them what kind of love we were talking about as a spiritual need.

One confirmand replied that the love we're talking about is God's love – God is just there for you.

Yes, God loves us. But that doesn't necessarily mean that God *likes* us. "Liking is a nice, comfortable thing. God's love is much more than that. The cross, the symbol of the love of God, is not a nice, comfortable thing.

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No, the love of God makes demands on us. If we are to follow Jesus, we have to give up some things, and the first thing is our self-centeredness. Can you think of anything less self-centered than the cross?

Jesus said that those who place themselves last will be first in the Kingdom of God.

That new thing that you “have to have” is not a sign of God’s favor, but rather a sign of our focus on ourselves. Recognition from others, and the desire to look good have nothing to do with God’s love for us, but are signs of our self-absorption.

God’s love, the love that is just there for us, is meant to open us up to what is *always there for us*, no matter what. God’s love opens us up to the infinite, to the everlasting. God’s love takes us to a place where we can take joy in God and in all that God has made.

—And not all that God has made is stuff we can touch with our hands or see with our eyes. Some of what God has made is relational, and some is spiritual, and some defies categories. Today’s reading from 1 John says:

My dear friends, we are already God’s children, though what we will be hasn’t yet been seen. But we do know that when Christ returns, we will be like him, because we will see him as he truly is. This hope makes us keep ourselves holy, just as Christ is holy. (1

John 3:1-3, CEV)

God’s love is about things like hope and sacredness and becoming like Christ. That means taking responsibility for our part in the world, how we might be making the world more just or peaceful. For only when we engage ourselves in hope and healing can we truly be living out the love of God.

4. We Love Each Other

Getting back to Wednesday’s Confirmation class, the confirmands had more insights into what love is.

One confirmand talked about unconditional love: love like she gets from her mother. That, she said, is the kind of love that we each have a deep spiritual need for.

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That's why today's reading from the first letter of John talks about God letting us be called his children. Parents give unconditional love to their children — or at least they hope to do so. God gives us that kind of unconditional love in reality.

Again, love has not even a smidgen of selfishness. Unconditional love from one person to another is love that doesn't make demands to gratify selfish desires. Unconditional love is given freely.

You're probably here today because someone has given you unconditional love, and that has allowed you to recognize the love of God.

Two other confirmands talked about the bond you can get between friends or teammates — people who do things with you. It's a bond of loyalty and friendship.

That again means placing the other person's needs — or the group's needs — ahead of your own. In order to achieve a greater goal, like winning a game, you give up your own needs and work as a team.

The sports analogy goes a long way, and if you talk about the opposing team as sin or evil, it works pretty well. We have enemies, like violence and people who do violence. We want to be united against forces that do harm.

Yet Jesus tells us that our love is not to be just for our teammates. It is not just for family or friends. We are to love our enemies, and pray for those who persecute us.

This defines love as so totally unselfish that it can try to see the point of view of one diametrically opposed. Love like this, love that sets self aside to desire good for an enemy, and even work for the good of the enemy — that's the love that Jesus taught about.

Jesus was put to death because he loved the world so much that he wanted to do away with selfishness. And to do away with selfishness means transforming the world from a privilege-based culture to a love-based culture.

People who have the privilege don't like that. People in Jesus' time like the High Priest and the Roman occupiers didn't like it, so Jesus was put to death.

It's not much different today. A lot of people are threatened by the idea of a love-based culture, because their privilege would be cut off.

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And it's not just the wealthy who have privileges. White people experience a lot less prejudice than black or Hispanic people. That's a form of privilege. Members of organizations that lobby for them have privileges – even if it's something like AARP or AAA. Anyone who owns a home or who is married has tax advantages that are privileges. The list goes on. Some people have more privileges than others, but all of us with privileges don't want them taken away.

What a radical idea to have a *love-based culture*! Jesus called it the "Kingdom of God."

5. When we experience love, we need to make a loving response.

The wonderful thing is that we have something that approaches a love-based culture. It's the church. Oh, it's far from perfect, but here we have an organization dedicated to the pursuit of unselfishness. We give of ourselves in many ways to make love real – whether it's in worship where we praise God or at the Community Meal, where we offer food for free. In so many ways, we try to live out our unselfishness, which you could call love, or the Kingdom of God.

In fact, of all the churches I've served, this particular church and one other come closest to that ideal of the Kingdom of God.

Bonnie Morton, whom most of you know, came into this church and was built up into a leader. She told others that this was a "very loving" church.

Dan & Patsy Roe came into this church and were accepted and loved, and look where Patsy is now!

There are four additional families I can think of who came into this church, were accepted, loved, counseled, given assistance and sent out. This was all in the last six years. They are now active in other churches in other places.

And I don't know that I could count the number of children and youth who have come into the circle of our Christian Education program who have come in with broken spirits and have gone out enriched.

All of this is not just because we're nice people, but because God is good, and because we want to love in the way that God loves: unselfishly.

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God has given abundant love to this congregation. And we want to respond with love.

That certainly means giving financially. I encourage you to give financially in proportion to what you've received, and that usually means a percentage of your income, and perhaps a percentage of your accumulated wealth.

There are also many other ways that you can continue to help this church in its pursuit of a love-based culture. Some of those ways we haven't even thought of yet. There are many ways to serve in worship and on committees and in teaching and in reaching out.

So I invite you to consider the ways in which you might respond to the love of God today.

Think how much the Father loves us. He loves us so much that he lets us be called his children, as we truly are. But since the people of this world did not know who Christ is, they don't know who we are. My dear friends, we are already God's children, though what we will be hasn't yet been seen. But we do know that when Christ returns, we will be like him, because we will see him as he truly is. This hope makes us keep ourselves holy, just as Christ is holy. **(1 John 3:1-3, CEV)**

What marvelous love the Father has extended to us! Just look at it—we're called children of God! That's who we really are. But that's also why the world doesn't recognize us or take us seriously, because it has no idea who he is or what he's up to. But friends, that's exactly who we are: children of God. And that's only the beginning. Who knows how we'll end up! What we know is that when Christ is openly revealed, we'll see him—and in seeing him, become like him. All of us who look forward to his Coming stay ready, with the glistening purity of Jesus' life as a model for our own. **(1 John 3:1-3, The Message)**

See what love the Father has given us, that we should be called children of God; and that is what we are. The reason the world does not know us is that it did not know him. Beloved, we are God's children now; what we will be has not yet been revealed. What we do know is this: when he is revealed, we will be like him, for we will see him as he is. And all who have this hope in him purify themselves, just as he is pure. **(1 John 3:1-3, NRSV)**