

Love Actually

[John 15:9-17](#)

Last night as I was thinking about this morning's sermon I thought "I just seem to be preaching the same sermon over and over again." And then I laughed because indeed this is the same sermon... we heard in our gospel reading a continuation of Jesus' last words to his disciples, which is often thought of as a sermon. So it's not surprising that our reflection this week bears similarity to last week. Thursday of this week is Ascension Day when the church remembers Jesus ascending into heaven. So this morning, we can really imagine that these are Jesus' final words to us, his disciples.

Jesus gave his lengthy "final discourse" after Jesus had washed the disciples' feet and I think it is useful to put it in that context. The Hebrew prophets often used dramatic acts to make a point, and in the washing of the disciples' feet, Jesus is acting like a prophet who challenges the dominant viewpoint with God's perspective. His act of washing their feet, of taking the role of a household servant, is a dramatic act which symbolizes a totally different world from normal – one where the most important is also the least important – a world where the leader is also the servant.

And this is the kind of love that we are to show to one another.

Jack Kornfield, a Buddhist teacher, talks of a time that he spent as a monk. The older monks were revered and whenever a monk met a senior monk they were expected not just to bow but to drop to their knees. Since Kornfield was the newest monk, he spent a lot of time on his knees!

I wonder how it would be if every time we met another person we revered them in our hearts and minds. If every time we met another person we saw them as a manifestation of the Christ. I know it would

change the way I think quite radically. Have you ever watched your thoughts when you are people watching? I criticize the things people wear, the way they do their hair, the expression on their face... whatever I see or make up about them...

Could I turn that around? Could I instead say, "There is Jesus having fun dressing in a weird way, I bow to the Christ in that person"?

I don't know if I can, but now I've thought of it I'm going to try, and I invite you to join me in this experiment. It will mean re-training our minds because we are used to criticizing and that's what we learn everyday from the media. So if we are serious it probably means spending time thinking about the people we habitually criticize and turning that criticism into reverence and love; if you are visual like me, it may mean intentionally people watching, maybe sitting in your car outside the grocery store, looking at people and in your heart practicing reverence instead of criticism.

Part of our practice of prayer, of inner work is to send love to those who need it. Most often we think of those who are close to us, those we care for or those who we have been asked to pray for. But what about those we dislike? Those who we disagree with? In our vespers service we pray for others using the form "We bring to God" One of our prayers is "We bring to God, silently, someone whom we find hard to like or forgive or trust" and after a pause to identify that someone the people respond, "Holy One, *We ask your blessing.*"

If we are serious about love as Jesus taught it, we will practice sending love not only to those who are close to us but also to those who irritate us, those we dislike and those who are our enemies, who threaten our peace.

This final sermon of Jesus' comes from John's gospel. As you know, John's gospel has a different perspective than the other three. John does not talk about self-denial so much as coming from the fullness of God's

love for us to love God's world which includes all the people in it. The first miracle or sign that Jesus does, according to John, is turn water into more wine than the party could drink in a week – and not just wine but excellent wine.

This is how John sees things – God's provision is abundant – God's love is extravagant and it is from the overflowing of that love that we get to love. To the woman at the well who had had almost too many husbands to count, Jesus does not criticize but tells her that he can give her water which will bring eternal life. From the overflowing of the water of life springing up in our hearts we get to share love.

I suspect this is what Jesus is talking about when he talks about bearing fruit. He says, "You did not choose me but I chose you. And I appointed you to go and bear fruit, fruit that will last, so that the Father will give you whatever you ask him in my name." This could be translated, "You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you in order that you may go and may bear fruit and your fruit may remain, in order that whatever you may ask the father in my name may be given to you." It sounds like the bearing fruit and the receiving what we ask are somehow tied up together.

So bearing fruit is pretty important. What does Jesus mean by fruit?

He doesn't spell it out, but we can assume it has to do with love. The apostle Paul says "the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. (Gal. 5:22,23) Notice that these are all qualities of being; "love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control."

I think these are qualities that we associate with Jesus. Yes, even the cleansing of the temple was I think a carefully controlled and thought out prophetic act like washing the disciples' feet, which turned the thinking of the times on its head, challenging the status quo.

So this may be our measure – to the extent that we are embodying love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control, we are manifesting the reign of God in our lives.

Gary Chapman wrote a book “The Five Love Languages” in which he argues that there are five ways that we give and receive love in intimate relationships and that in order to communicate love we need to know the love language of our partner.

In the same way, there are different ways of communicating our love for God and love for one another – from Chapman’s list I would pick acts of service, quality time and words of affirmation. But the fruit that we are to bear adds in a fourth way of loving and that is by the quality of our beingness, by our very embodiment of the fruits of the Spirit.

As we age, and yes we all are, we are less able to engage in the acts of service that once sustained us and provided the main vehicle for us to express love. So I want to point out that washing each others’ feet does not always mean physically getting down on the floor, reverencing the God in one another does not mean dropping to our knees – the quality of our beingness shared in words and presence is as much a part of bearing fruit as doing stuff for others.

This is the love that comes out of the fullness of God’s grace transforming us into Christlike beings. This is the love that sees Christ in even the most bigoted person. This is Jesus’ love which we as his disciples seek to emulate.

And the result of all this will be joy. I give the last word to Jesus, “ I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete.”