

Sixth Sunday of Easter; May 5, 2024

+ John 15:9-17 +

“As Christ Has Loved You”

“As the Father has loved me, so also I have loved you. Remain in my love. If you hold on to my commands, you will remain in my love, just as I have held on to my Father’s commands and remain in his love. I have told you these things so that my joy would continue to be in you and that your joy would be complete.

“This is my command: Love one another as I have loved you. No one has greater love than this: that someone lays down his life for his friends. You are my friends if you continue to do the things I instruct you. I no longer call you servants, because a servant does not know what his master is doing. But I have called you friends, because everything that I heard from my Father, I have made known to you. You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you to go and bear fruit, fruit that will endure, so that the Father will give you whatever you ask in my name. These things I am instructing you, so that you love one another.”

It is a beautiful movie, I think. The musical score is haunting. The cinematography won a 1993 Academy Award. The ending is heart-breaking and beautiful and thought-provoking. The movie I’m talking about is “A River Runs Through It.” Have you ever seen it? “A River Runs Through It” was filmed in Montana. It could have been filmed closer to home, in the southwestern part of this commonwealth. Mountains in the background, lush forests, clear rivers. It’s about all of that, but mostly the movie is about family.

There’s the Reverend McLean, a Presbyterian minister and gentle soul. Then there’s son Norman; he’s the good egg. He works hard at his chosen career, and commits himself to his wife and children. And then there’s the other son, Paul. Paul is likeable person, very outgoing and friendly. But he’s a self-destroyer. Paul stays out too late; he drinks too much and gambles too much. Finally, word reaches the family that Paul was beaten to death over a gambling debt, body dumped in an alley. And that sets up the ending of the movie, which is so thought-provoking and heartbreaking. The camera is on the Reverend McLean as he stands in his pulpit. It has been years since his son’s death, but it comes back to him now as he speaks. He says, “Each of us here today will at one time in our life look upon a loved one who is in need. And we’ll ask God the same question. We’ll pray and say, ‘I’m willing to help, Lord. But what, if anything, is needed?’ We can seldom help those closest to us. Either we don’t know what part of ourselves to give or the part we have to give is not wanted. So, it is those we live with who elude us. But we can still love them. We can love them completely, even without understanding.”

Does that sound familiar? I’m not asking if you remember it from the movie. Does it sound familiar, like reality in a family, living with those closest to you? They can often elude you. You want to give them something they need of yourself, some wise advice; you want to give them your time, to give them your help and yet they resist. They push you away; they don’t want it. But can you still love them? Can we love them completely, without understanding?

In a very real way, that is what Jesus is talking about in today’s Gospel. He is talking about loving one another in his family, and he gives us that new command. And we might say, “Yes, but love always applies. ‘Love your enemies,’ Jesus even said.” That’s true, but with these words the Son of God focuses us on those who are closest to us. Maybe the relationships that are the most difficult, and yet the most dear.

And we realize: this command of Jesus, it doesn't really break our hearts. Rather, Christ's words fill us with this purpose, and this power, and this joy: to love someone close closely, no matter what.

"Love each other," Jesus says. Just like that. He makes it sound so easy, doesn't he? But how can you love that son when he resists, when he pushes you away? How can you love a mom or dad who look at the world a different way than you do? How can you love a sister or brother who used to have time for you, but don't anymore? How can you love a husband or wife when day after day, year after year, you become more aware of their faults and weaknesses?

Jesus has an answer for that. And it comes in two parts. The first: **"Love one another as I have loved you."** The Son of God came down out of heaven because he loved you. It was not because you deserved his love, of course. You absolutely did not, and neither did I or any sinner. And we resisted him, of course. We could not understand this gift; we did not ask for it or even want it. He loved you so much that he was totally obedient, on your behalf and in your place. But you and I pushed that away, too. Because we know we should be generous, and we figure we have been. We know we should speak well of others, and figure we have. But we don't figure God will demand perfection, because hey, nobody's perfect. The perfect life of Christ on our behalf is not something we reached out and grabbed for. But Jesus did it for us. When he says, **"I have held on to my Father's commands and remain in his love,"** nobody could argue with him, because there was never a time he strayed from the Father's commands.

Jesus even obeyed his Father to most astonishing level, giving up his life on the cross for his friends – for you! But we did not want this highest act of sacrifice. We did not want to be his friends in return. He did it anyway. That's Christ's love: one way, when you and I could not possibly have deserved it, did not want it, and pushed it away.

Normal love isn't like that. It's reciprocal. We love people because of something good in them. "I love my mom because she listens and she makes me feel good. My dad, I love him because he paid for me to go to Europe and taught me to play sports. My son makes me proud. My daughter's a wonderful person." It's always something in them that attracts the love. And that's what makes it so hard to love when we're not seeing the good. When we see the faults, the refusals, the stiff-arms and the push-offs.

"Love one another as I have loved you." It is to meet someone's need when they don't even want it met. It is help when there is no way to pay back. To give yourself into resistance and fault. To pray an intercession that was not requested.

I once overheard an experienced pastor trying to talk young parents into having their baby baptized. (Thin walls are a gift from God when you're a rookie with an office next to a pro.) Clearly this mom and dad did not understand sin and grace well, or the importance and power of baptism. So the pastor put it this way: "You will bring your son up in your arms. Then you'll give him into my arms. Then I'll give him into Jesus' arms." This is the power of Jesus' kind of love. It wins people over. Whether a baby in baptism's water or an adult in a pew or an adolescent hearing the gospel from a friend, Jesus' love destroys resistance and distance. It turns stiff-arms into embraces. It makes people his friends – not servants, but friends for eternity.

Wherever you go with the love of Christ in your heart, you go with peace with God, the forgiveness of your sins, and the promise of life forever.

“Lord,” we ask, “how can I love someone when I don’t understand them? How can I love someone when they don’t give anything back?” The first part of Jesus’ answer is to love like him. The second part is to remain in his love. Whenever it was in life that Jesus’ love won you over (probably for most of us in baptism) stay right there. Don’t move. Stay right there because that’s where divine love – pure, holy, and everlasting – will always be found.

You will find it every time you go back to your baptism. You will find it every time you read it and hear it, every time you receive the body and blood Jesus gave for you in love. It is human nature to want to be on the move: next thing, next day, next job. It is harder simply to be still and calm and remain. But here again is the power of Jesus’ love: when you are in his arms, he makes you want to remain. Nowhere could be better.

Remaining in the love of Christ will also call you again and again to reflect it. One-way, even when we don’t understand, even when it’s undeserved. Even when it’s unwanted and pushed away.

Jesus also says this in today’s Gospel: **“You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you to go and bear fruit, fruit that will endure, so that the Father will give you whatever you ask in my name.”** Whatever we ask for in Jesus’ name! According to his will, according to his directives, including his command to love as he has loved us. It is an offer we should take him up on. Let’s pray like this, in Jesus’ name, according to his will: “Heavenly Father, make me your representative. Let me show what you’re like by how I live and how I talk to the people closest to me. Rule in my heart by your grace, so that no matter what I get back, even if it’s nothing, even if it’s negative, I give grace.”

And we can pray like this: “Jesus, you won me over with your gracious love. It brought me to you and made me love like you. May it win them over, too. May I put your love on display with my actions and speak your saving love, so that they too may embrace you and love like you.”

Toward the end of our services, we have the Prayer of the Church. On some Sundays, there is a spot where I say, “Hear us, Lord, as we bring you our private petitions.” And then there’s twenty seconds of radio silence. What do you pray for during that time? What’s your first instinct? Isn’t it your family? Why? Because they’re the closest to you, and also because it gets so complicated in those relationships. Fathers and sons, husbands and wives, brothers and sisters. And by “complicated” I mean “rough.” Whatever you ask the Father in Jesus’ name is yours. Don’t ask first for them to be more considerate and nice to you. Ask for Jesus’ love to show through you. Pray in Jesus’ name to love like him as you remain in his love. Pray for the love that won you to show through you, to win them and show through them, too. Amen.