

“Defining Love?”

**First Presbyterian Church
Pastor Dave Carlson
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Old Testament lesson: Song of Solomon 8:6, 7

New Testament lesson: John 15:9-17

Sometime around the 18th Century, Feb. 14 was chosen as Saint Valentine’s Day, a day to celebrate love by exchanging expressions of love with one another, everything from chocolate and candy for kids, diamond rings for her, and the hiding of little love notes for him – seems fair.

But long before the holiday was created, there was love. “As the Father has loved me,” says Jesus, “so I have loved you; abide in my love.” What is love? Rather than have me answer that – and before we look further into today’s scripture reading about love – our worship planning team (Bonnie and David and myself) and I asked some friends to tell us what is love. Let’s watch: (*play video*)

As we saw, love is centered around the most important people in our lives – our grandparents, other family members, and our church family. But also, as Charles Townley said, “You can love your work, or hate it,” or “you can love God, which we all do.” And then Charles wisely ended by connecting love to his spouse, the lovely Betty Townley, as well as her good cooking and his good health and long life.

Work, life-partners, good food, health and long life – each of these is a gift from God, an expression of God’s love for us. Jesus tells us to abide in his love – to live out the divine love that he personified and embodied. And then he says, “If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father’s commandments and abide in his love.” If we are to know what love is, to experience it and share it, then we have to follow the teachings of Jesus and live Christ-like lives.

There are six qualities of true, divine love that help us be more like Jesus. The first is that love completes us, makes us whole, more than we are without God’s love. Jesus says, “I have said these things to you about love so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete.” We say that love completes us, but it is only through the Spirit of God that we can have a love in our hearts that truly completes us.

If we lose touch with the source of true love – and go off chasing after people or things out of lust, self-centeredness, gluttony – than we will never know true love, divine love, God’s love, at least not fully. There will always be something crowding it out – sexual addiction, disregard for others, excesses in food, drink or whatever.

To know love completely, as God intended, we have to let God’s love complete us. We have to let God’s love be our everything. Then we can begin to discover and receive

expressions of that love as gifts from God – in our friends and families, in our work or daily activities, in the good gifts of the earth. So, first we allow God’s love to complete us, and then we share that love. Jesus says, “This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. No one has greater love than this, to lay down one’s life for one’s friends.”

Sharing God’s love with one another; it means putting the other person’s interests ahead of our own. And we can do that boldly and confidently and fully when we trust that it is God at the source of our lives, and God’s love completes us and so can we share that love completely with others.

This is perhaps the hardest thing to learn about love, and to live it. Sharing love with others means risking everything we have. Or as Jennifer Vansandt said in the video we saw, “Love is everything from anger to elation and everything in between. At the center of love is knowing those feelings are part of the process.

What Jennifer is pointing to is that love is more powerful than any other emotion or any object of desire. True love is finding grace and mercy in the presence of another human being particularly during troubling moments, and knowing that whatever might be getting in the way of love at that moment will not last – knowing that love will triumph over all the other emotions. Continually regrounding ourselves in God’s love is only way we can share love with one another over and above all the other emotions we may be feeling.

The third thing about love that we see in today’s reading is that love is transformational – it changes us. Jesus says, “You are my friends, if you do what I command you. I do not call you servants any longer, because the servant does not know what the master is doing; but I have called you friends....” In God’s love, we are transformed from “servants,” as Jesus says, to “friends.” Servants do what they are told under compulsion or by force, whereas friends do what they do out of their love for God and one another.

You may know yourself more as a servant in life, someone who is always being yanked around by the world, forced into this situation or that, unsure of yourself or your place in life. There is a way to get beyond that, and that way is to really apply the teachings of Jesus in your life. Take the risks you feel called to, confident that God’s love for you is big enough to see you through to a new, more authentic way of being.

Fourth, love is transparent. “I have called you friends,” says Jesus, because I have made known to you everything that I have heard from my Father.” Loving one another, abiding in Christ’s love, means being open to one another, making everything known. If you have secrets from people – particularly people you love – Jesus is calling you to find a way to clear things up, say what’s what, speak the truth in love, trust that God will see you through.

Fifth, love is irresistible. “You did not choose me,” says Jesus, “but I chose you.” We are the object of God’s love. God loves us no matter what, and always will.

This is how we are able to enter into a life-time relationship with another human being – because God’s eternal love is the foundation of that relationship, or should be. And when it is, such a relationship will last forever, even beyond the grave, which God showed us in the resurrection of Jesus Christ, in his love for us.

Finally, love is fruitful. “I appointed you,” says Jesus, “to go and bear fruit, fruit that will last, so that the Father will give you whatever you ask him in my name. I am giving you these commands so that you may love one another.”

Love not only begets new life – babies – but also new possibilities, new hopes, new realities. Love brings people together, puts the end to wars, creates new relationships – and it goes on giving birth to new possibilities until all the world is a reflection of God’s love. That is the power of love. That is the greatest gift of God. Knowing and sharing divine love is our greatest way to help transform this world into the kingdom of God, heaven on earth.

As we look to affirm and uphold God’s love, let each of us look for those places in our lives – your life – where love is less than all of this – less than complete, less than fully shared, less than transformational, less than transparent, less than irresistible, less than fruitful.

Any place in your life where love is “less than” is an opportunity for you to transform your world into something extraordinary, beyond imagination. God is extraordinary, not of this world – God is much bigger than that.

And yet, God entered into this world in the person of Jesus Christ to show his love. In showing and sharing God’s love for us, Christ has set in motion the Spirit of divine love.

And that love is moving among us and through us, with the promise of transforming the world from war to peace, from hunger to plenty, from loneliness to companionship, from sadness to joy. This is love. This is God’s gift to you, and in you, to all the world.
Amen.

Pastoral Prayer

We invoke your gentlest blessings, gracious God, on all true lovers. We praise you for the great longing that draws the soul of men and women into relationships, and calls them to leave all the dear bonds of the past for a greater love still.

We thank you for revealing the power of love, which brings us in communion with the One Beloved, and in him with one another.

We thank you for the transformational power of love, which softens our nature, calling us to draw from a deeper well of tenderness and commitment than we can imagine.

Help us to overcome all selfishness in the passion of self-surrender.

For we do surrender ourselves to you, O Lord, asking your Spirit of healing and wholeness upon us and especially those we know and think of facing illness and need.

Let us now, then, surrender even this prayer to the Lord, in the manner he taught to pray together, saying:

**Our Father, who art in heaven, Hallowed be thy name;
Thy kingdom come; Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread; And forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors;
And lead us not into temptation, But deliver us from evil,
For thine is the Kingdom, and the Power, and the Glory, forever. Amen.**