

Staying in Love with God our Whole Lives Long  
John 15:9-11 and 1 John 4:7-21  
Sunday, July 29<sup>th</sup>, 2018  
First United Methodist Church, Baraboo  
Pastor Marianne Cotter

Last year the Confirmation youth created a mosaic for fellowship hall. They got to choose the words. They picked “God is love.” As we read in 1 John 4:8 “whoever does not love, does not know God, for God is love.”

What kind of love is God? Is it the kind of love that friends have for each other (*philia* in Greek)? The kind of love that you have for people who were part of your lives for many years, then you are separated but can pick up right where you left off when you see each other again? Or is God the kind of love that lovers have for each other (*eros* in Greek)? The kind of love that longs for union with another? Or is God the kind of love that only is concerned about the well being of the other? Sacrificial, self giving love (*agape* in Greek)? According to The Elder (the anonymous author of the first letter of John) God is this kind of love (*agape*).

Agape is God’s reigning attribute, more than power, majesty, glory it is love that defines who God is. All our loving is possible because of God. “We love because God first loved us.” Genuine human love is God’s love flowing through us; it’s not something we create. “Perfect love casts out fear.” Those who love in the way the Elder teaches have no fear of judgment upon death. But it is what the elder wrote in 1 John 4:10 that is our focus today. Let me read it to you again “In this is love: not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins.” The Father’s love is seen in the giving of his Son. This is done apart from anything humans do to deserve it. This is a love that expects nothing in return. The kind of love that has only the best interests of the other in mind. This is a love that is seen in Jesus Christ; who chooses to embrace the limits of human life. As we read in Philippians 2: Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness.” This was a love that chose to life among us, and was willing to suffer death to show the world that now there will be nothing – no human failings, no shame, or guilt or even death – that would be able to separate us from God.

For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God—(Ephesians 2:8). It is important that we believe that (very important even). Yet The Elder is saying to us ‘staying in love with God’ involves something more than just believing. It’s participating in this reality of God loving us sacrificially. Listen again to verses 11-12 <sup>1</sup>Beloved, since God loved us so much, we also ought to

love one another. <sup>12</sup>No one has ever seen God; if we love one another, God lives in us, and his love is perfected in us. God invites us to participate in this flow of sacrificial love, setting limits on our lives, for the sake of the other; loving in a way that expects nothing in return. When we love in this way, we participate in the love of God.

Love is participatory. These images might make this clear. Think of a church youth group. Two activities: watching the Super Bowl together (eating snacks, cheering on their team) vs. playing a game of touch football together. Participating with each other in the physical game – running, tagging, throwing the ball, competing, expending energy – is going to be a much richer, fuller experience of friendship and fun – of “*Koininia*”. Or imagine eating with your friends to a fancy restaurant vs. planning, shopping for, preparing and serving, and eating a fancy meal for friends at your home. The second is going to be a much more memorable and meaningful experience of showing love for your friends. (OK, some of you may think ‘that sounds like a lot of work’ and I’d much rather eat out. But I hope you get the picture.)

Or compare the experience of listening to a sermon about love vs. concrete acts of caring shown for a real, flawed person who may not always appreciate or thank you for what you do. Take Harry and Meghan for example. Harry and Meghan were a couple who were about to enter into the covenant of marriage. They listened to a sermon by a pastor named Michael Curry (the presiding bishop of the Episcopal Church) about love. Rev. Curry tried to do what The Elder did: talk about love in a way that would be meaningful and memorable. Rev. Curry knew, as the Elder knew, that the best way to talk about love is to tell the story of what God was up to in Jesus Christ. Rev. Curry quoted from 1 John 4: 7 “Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God; everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love.” Here’s part of what he said: “He didn’t die for anything he could get out of it. Jesus did not get an honorary doctorate for dying. He didn’t...he wasn’t getting anything out of it. He gave up his life, he sacrificed his life, for the good of the other, for the wellbeing of the world...for us. That’s what love is. Love is not selfish and self-centered. Love can be sacrificial, and in so doing, becomes redemptive. And that way of unselfish, sacrificial, redemptive love changes lives, and it can change the world. ”

Rev. Curry’s sermon was live streamed from Windsor Castle in England on May 19. And it wasn’t addressed just to Prince Harry and Megan Markle but to a world wide audience. Rev. Curry wasn’t speaking just to people in a partnered relationships, like the covenant marriage. He was speaking to every human being’s yearning for authentic love which is expressed in a myriad of ways: sister/brother, friends, parent/child, adult children and their parents, pet owners for their pets, co-workers for each other and those who work for justice. In each of these situations, we are at times called to share a love which asks for nothing in return. A love that voluntarily places limits on our own time, resources; a love that chooses to sacrifice for the sake

of the other. This love may be easy to describe because all we do is point to Jesus, but it is hard to live out.

Now, two months after their wedding, Prince Harry and the Duchess of Sussex (as Meghan Markle is now known) are doing the challenging work of participating in the love of God by performing concrete acts of service – sacrificial love – for each other. They are learning what it means to bridge class differences, differences of nationality and differences of race in their attempt to live out the beautiful words spoken at their wedding. Some of us here today watched along with the world as Harry's mother and father Charles and Diana were married in storybook pomp and splendor. And we watched them struggle in the hard work that loving sometimes requires. Their successes and failures were on display for all to see. Yet what I for one remember is that beguiling smile of Diana's and her ability to show empathy, and participate in her own unique way in the flow of divine love for the world, seen in her charity work around the world. In the end we cannot judge anyone's success (or lack of it) in the arena of loving. All we can do is try our best to love others as Christ loves us. We love because God first loved us. God loves us regardless of our ability to return love. All the love we are, by God's grace, able to share with others comes from God. We don't generate it. It flows through us. Authentic love is not saccharine sweet. It is not romance or day dreams or magic kingdoms, princes and princesses. It is doing little things, every day, day after day.

What I hope you'll take away from this sermon is this: staying in love with God doesn't mean just believing in Jesus' death for us on the cross. It means participating in God's self-giving which seeks to be repeated again and again in our lives. I'd like to share one final image of this participation in the life of God. It's from my work with the Methodist Federation for Social Action, a group I'm part of. Every year at Annual Conference they give an award to two people who have worked for justice and peace in our annual conference. One of the recipients this year was Mary Beth You won't recognize her name (she's Roman Catholic). But she lives in Madison and along with United Methodists, Baptists, people of other faiths and no faith in particular have stood for an hour every Monday on a downtown Madison street corner as a witness for peace. Every week they pass out flyers about different topics related to peace and justice. They are there for an hour. Every Monday. Mary Beth Schlagheck is the organizer of this witness for peace. And she's been doing this for thirty-seven years.

Why does she do it? From what I learned about Mary Beth at Annual Conference I'd say she does it out of love, the kind of participatory, sacrificial love The Elder wrote about. The kind that puts limits on what we do so that others can flourish. The problems of war, poverty, environmental destruction, unfair treatment of veterans, racism are big problems. No one person can solve them. But we all can do the little bit we are able to do. That's what Mary Beth does. Justice is the form love takes when dealing with groups. Like the love of God in Jesus Christ, I believe her witness

is offered with no thought/expectation of what she will get in return. It is not up to her anyway. It is up to God, for I believe it is God's loving working through her that allows her to be consistent and persistent in this witness of one person staying in love with God into her eight decade.

I believe if The Elder were here today he'd encourage us: you really can stay in love with God your whole lives long. It can happen if we are no stranger to the kind of love that asks for nothing in return. Go out and do a loving thing today; something you don't feel like doing. Something for which you won't get a reward, get praise or anything back. And then smile, knowing you get to participate in the mystery of God' alive in us. Thanks be to God who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.