

“Loving is Difficult to Do”
May 6, 2007
Preached at The United Church of Los Alamos
By Don Childers
Based on John 13: 31-35

First it is good to be back from a time of rest.

The subject today is about “love”. I almost hesitate to even talk about “love” within a culture that so overuses the word that it has become trivialized.

When it comes to love we can buy photos, books, pins, bracelets, t-shirts, and other things that have the word plastered all over the item. We throw the word around easily talking about how we love our spouse, love our children, love our car, love chocolate, love a sunset, love the mountains, and love ice cream. We talk about love, but I suspect that in reality it is more difficult to love than we think.

-1-

We understand intuitively what we mean when we say a father’s or mother’s love for their child. Most of us realize that the quality of love that we have for our car is different from our love of our spouse. Kids may understand “love” more than we know. The following is from a website where 4-8 year olds answer the question “what is love?”

“When someone loves you, the way they say your name is different. You just know that your name is safe in their mouths” (Billy, age 4)¹

“Love is when you go out to eat and give somebody most of your French fries without making them give you any of theirs.” (Chrissy, age 6).

“Love is what’s in the room with you at Christmas if you stop opening presents and listen.” (Bobby, age 7)

“If you want to learn to love better, you should start with a friend that you hate.” (Nikki, age 6)

“Love is when your puppy licks your face even after you left him alone all day.” (Mary Ann, age 4)

FINALLY, “You really shouldn’t say I LOVE YOU unless you mean it. But if you mean it, you should say it a lot. People forget.” (Jessica, age 8)

-2-

The text in John concerns the farewell talk of Jesus to his disciples. The story begins with the story of Jesus washing the feet of the disciples, something that in that culture only lowly servants did. It is this living parable that sets the tone for everything that follows.

In verse 34, Jesus announces that he is giving a “NEW” Commandment to the disciples. When we read the commandment we might wonder what in the world is “new” about the commandment. This commandment was and is the heart and soul of the Torah. **“You are to love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another.”**

¹ This and the following come from. <http://www.basicjokes.com/djoke.php?id=3475>.

Jesus is now asking his disciples to mimic the love that is between Jesus and God by their own service. Jesus demonstrates his love for God by accepting the cross that is now before him and trusting that God will work things out. Jesus demonstrates his love for the world and for his disciples by being willing to get on his knees and wash their feet, to be a servant. Thus John is saying that those who want to follow Jesus and love God must love as Jesus loved and serve as Jesus served.

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That is a profound thought. The true mark of following Jesus is whether we love one another. Jesus will underscore this by saying, ***“By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.”*** This verse implies that if we **do not** have love for one another then everyone will **know** that we are not following Jesus.

In the Letter of 1 John, which models itself after the Gospel of John (different John but similar theme), the elder John writes about love expanding his teaching and applying it to the practical realities of church life. He writes, ***“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.”***²

The Elder is not finished. ***“Those who say, ‘I love God’ and hate their brothers or sisters, are liars; for those who do not love a brother or sister whom they have seen, cannot love God whom they***

² 1John 4:7-8

have not seen. The commandment we have from him (Jesus) is this: those who love God must love their brothers and sisters also.³

These are profound words and thoughts. Loving is more than a marketing tool or a nice slogan, it is the heart and soul of faith and of the work of the church.

-3-

We are not doing a very good job following what Jesus said. We talk a lot about love but our actions reveal a real contradiction. I suppose it has always been this way. Thank God for grace, we say, but does saying that alone let us off the hook? Are we free to cloak our hate in a garment of love talk? Or when we do are we not like the “wolf in sheep’s clothing” that infiltrates the flock?

I am concerned about the growing violent rhetoric today from some within the Christian faith. The image of Jesus on his knees washing the feet of the disciples is being shifted to that of a “warrior Jesus” who will slaughter millions in the final judgment and calls upon his followers today to take up the sword.

Martin Marty, Church historian and teacher, wrote in 2004 about this in an article titled, “Rambo Jesus”. He begins with a quote that is chillingly current. The quote reads,

“The American Nation is engaged in this very hour in an attempt to Christianize every phase of a righteous war waged to save the life of democracy.”

³ 1John 4:20.

This was written by Lieutenant George Stewart Jr. and Henry B. Wright, who were the YMCA's liaisons to the military in 1917-1918. Marty goes on to quote from this early 20th century article,

*"In this hour the young recruit is sick at heart and haunted by uncertainty, the YMCA's religious agent can reassure him by telling him of his vision of Jesus, 'sighting down a gun barrel and running a bayonet through an enemy's body.' At first I (Stewart and Wright) shrank from associating Jesus with the bayonet and essayed to place in his hands the sword the use of which He himself sanctioned. Then it was that I saw Heaven open and beheld One faithful and true...I discerned in His hands a bayonet sword attached to a rifle...He stood in the center of the line and the very front in the thickest of the fight."*⁴

Written in 1917-1918..

Dr. Marty goes on to point out that today we find a similar image of Jesus once again being presented. Only this image is not just attached to war but extends to other areas of our community life. From the mouths of many Christian leaders we hear words of love calling for actions of hate.

The "Left Behind" series of Jenkins and LaHaye, the graphic violence of Mel Gibson's "Passion of Christ" and the fiery speeches now heard from pulpits against Islam or Gays or feminists or whatever, presents a very different image of Jesus than the one we see here in the Gospel of John.

⁴ "Rambo Jesus", by Martin Marty, Christian Century, 2004. Found at http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_m1058/is_9_121/ai_n6173729/print.

Jesus believed that God is love and that love has the power to change things from the small to the large. Turning the other cheek was not an act of cowardice but an act of courage, to refuse to become like the one who hit us. Jesus teaches us to respond to hate with love, to persecution with forgiveness. We claim that Jesus' resistance to calling for vengeance, for not telling his disciples to defend him at all costs, and the fact that from the cross his words were not "Father get them for me!" but "Father, forgive them," that this is the "good news" of grace that can transform the world.

Paul, the apostle would write that those who are truly following the spirit of Christ, who have the spirit of Christ within are gentle and gracious. He writes,

Be sincere in your love for others. Hate everything that is evil and hold right to everything that is good. Love each other as brothers and sisters and honor others more than you do yourself. Never give up. Eagerly follow the Holy Spirit and serve the Lord. Let your hope make you glad. Be patient in time of trouble and never stop praying. Take care of God's needy people and welcome strangers into your home.

Ask God to bless everyone who mistreats you. Ask him to bless them and not to curse them. When others are happy, be happy with them, and when they are sad, be sad. Be friendly with everyone. Don't be proud and feel that you are smarter than others. Make friends with ordinary people. Don't mistreat someone who has mistreated you. But try to earn the respect of others and do your best to live at peace with everyone. Dear Friends, don't try to get even. Let God take revenge. In the scriptures the Lord says,

"I am the one to take revenge and pay them back"

THE SCRIPTURES ALSO SAY,

"If your enemies are hungry, give them something to eat. And if they are thirsty give them something to drink. This will be the

same as piling burning coals on their heads.” Don’t let evil defeat you, BUT DEFEAT EVIL WITH GOOD.”⁵

My grandfather, S. Earl Childers was a pastor and teacher all his adult life. He died the year that I was born. During World War II two of their three sons were serving in the Pacific Theater. Donald, for whom I am named, was captured by the Japanese in the Philippines. He survived the famous Death March and was a POW in the Philippines. He was killed in 1943 while being transported to Japan when an American sub sunk the ship that he was on.

Their other son, my uncle Gerald also served in the South Pacific including the invasion of the Philippines. He survived the war and continued to serve in the military retiring as a brigadier general. Gerald died just a few years ago.

I came across a sermon preached by my grandfather in 1943. At the time the family knew that Donald was a prisoner and that Gerald was somewhere in New Guinea. When I read that sermon I was greatly moved. The sermon was about love. My grandfather talked of the difficulty in loving an enemy. Yet, in that sermon preached in 1943 my grandfather talked of how we as “Christian” Americans would need to forgive and learn to love the Japanese. He talked of how one day the war would be over and that we would need to embrace our brothers and

⁵ Romans, 12:9-21, Contemporary English Version.

sisters in Japan once again. In these moments of war, he said, we of all people needed to heed Jesus' words of loving our enemy.

What risk my grandfather took with those words! How hard it must have been for him to preach those words with two sons involved in the war. I am sure that his heart was saying one thing and his faith another. It was his faith, his knowledge of scripture, and his prayer life that enabled him to rise above the hate that was swirling around in the world of that time and deliver that sermon.

Today we once again find ourselves in a world where hate swirls around us. We may be on the brink of a religious war and religious wars have a history of being vicious and destructive. What often comes out of the calls from religious leaders for vengeance and war is that in the end people abandon that religion.

It will be within our spiritual lives that we will find the ability and courage to love as Christ loves. It will be in our relationship with God that we will find the ability to rise above hate and love. In this time in particular it is important for the voice of love to be heard. It will be love that will change the world.

“There was a 4-year old child whose next door neighbor was an elderly man who had just lost his wife. When the child saw the man cry, the little boy went over into the man's yard and climbed on top of the man's lap and just sat there. When the boy's mother asked him what

he'd said to the neighbor, the little boy said, 'Nothing, I just helped him cry.'⁶ Love one another and love God and the world will change.

⁶ <http://www.basicjokes.com/djoke.php?id=3475>.