

“Love One Another”

John 15:1-17 • Romans 12:1-10

First Presbyterian Church, Corpus Christi, TX

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It's hard to believe that summer is already half over. I don't know how that happened. It seems like it was just May. I guess spending two weeks away at the seminary has something to do with it. Well for the rest of this summer I want us to spend some time thinking about what it means to be the church. What parts of our thinking about the nature of the church are biblical and therefore timeless, and what is more cultural and needs to be rethought as our culture has changed. I guess most importantly we want to think about the purpose of the church.

Søren Kierkegaard, the Danish theologian from the last century, told the story of a man who was walking down the street and passed a shop with a sign in the window that said, "Pants Pressed Here." The man looked at his pants and realized they were quite wrinkled so he went into the shop and began to take off his pants. The clerk was very upset by this and asked what he was doing. He said, "I want to have my pants pressed." The clerk then asked, "what makes you think we press pants?" He said, "the sign in the window says 'pants pressed here.'" The clerk then explained, "You don't understand. We don't press pants here, we paint signs."

Something similar happened to me a number of years ago. I had a suit I needed dry cleaned. I took it to a cleaner near our house called "One Hour Cleaners." I told them, "I'd like to pick it up later today." They responded, "the soonest this will be ready is next Wednesday." So I said, "I thought you did one hour cleaning." She explained, "That's just the name of the business. We can't actually clean your suit in an hour." By the way, they have since changed their name.

The point is, not everyone has the same idea when we say "church." We want to think about what we mean when we call ourselves a church, and what does Jesus expect us to mean. To begin our thinking we're going to spend the next few weeks looking at several of what I call

the "one another" commands in the New Testament. Over forty times we're told how we are to relate to each other as the church and they fit into five categories.

Over the last couple of years we've spent a good bit of time looking at picture we have of the early church immediately after Pentecost in Acts 2 because it's a picture of how God wants us to interact with one another and with those who don't yet have a relationship with Jesus. Acts 2 gives us that great picture of the early believers worshiping together, studying Scripture together, eating together, and caring for one another. The result in Acts 2:47 is that the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved. When we faithfully live out the "one another" commands, people want to be a part of it.

So this morning the first one we want to look at is "love one another." The command to love one another is the most important because all the other commands are simply specific ways we are to love each other. This is also the only "one another" command that comes directly from the mouth of Jesus. The Apostle John records Jesus saying this twice.

As we just heard in verse 12 of John 15, "This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you." This echoes what Jesus said back in John 13: "A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another: just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another. By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another."

You could actually say that John considered this the most important thing Jesus ever said. He repeats it five times in 1 John and then again in 2 John. The early church Father Jerome, in his commentary on Galatians, wrote, "The blessed John the Evangelist lived in Ephesus until extreme old age. His disciples could barely carry him to church and he could not muster the voice to speak many words. During

individual gatherings he usually said nothing but, 'Little children, love one another.' The disciples and brothers in attendance, annoyed because they always heard the same words, finally said, 'Teacher, why do you always say this?' He replied with a line worthy of John: 'Because it is the Lord's commandment and if it alone is kept, it is sufficient.'"

We also find the command to love one another five times in 1 Peter and throughout Paul's letters. So we're supposed to love one another. But what does that mean? What does loving one another look like? In Romans 12 Paul says, "Love one another with brotherly affection." Just before that, in verses 4 and 5, he said, "For as in one body we have many members, and the members do not all have the same function, so we, though many, are one body in Christ, and individually members of one another." The first point is that being the church means loving one another as family, actually closer than family. We are to be as close as parts of the body. As members of the Body of Christ we have an obligation to each other. As Paul says, we are members of one another.

The way this works in the church is by sharing our resources and one of our most valuable resources is time. I think this is one of the things Jesus is trying to teach us in his image of the vine and the branches. He is illustrating for us the Great Commandment, which he said is to love God and love others. Every command in the Bible fits into one of those categories.

Here in John 15 he says, "I am the vine; you are the branches. Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing." By the way, it's important to know that when Jesus says "you" it's plural. He's saying "y'all are the branches." He's talking to all of us together.

The picture he's painting for us is of grape vines. We had an opportunity to visit a vineyard a few years ago and learned how they grow grapes. The vine is the main trunk of the grape plant. They are planted in rows along some

kind of trellis. These grape vines can live for many years and grow to be quite thick. Out of this main vine are the branches that run along the trellis or supports in either direction. These branches are where the grapes grow.

Jesus says we are like those branches. If we abide in him and he in us we will bear much fruit. The word abide means to remain close. R.C. Sproul points out that "Jesus declared that...our fruitfulness is directly linked to our abiding in him." But we don't do it alone. Remember, "you" here is plural. Abiding, remaining close to Jesus, means remaining close to all the other branches, too. We are to be as close to one another as branches are to the vine.

The second thing Jesus shows us about loving one another is that it involves sacrifice. "This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. Greater love has no one than this, that someone lay down his life for his friends." Sometimes people will say something like, "a good marriage has to be 50/50." That's just not true. A good marriage, actually any loving relationship, has to be 100/100. Love involves sacrifice. You must be willing to love 100%.

This kind of sacrificial love is actually what made the early church grow and eventually take over the Roman Empire. Several times in the second and third centuries plagues swept through parts of the Roman Empire, sometimes claiming the lives of thousands every day. When that happened, many of the people living in the cities left for more remote areas trying to escape the plagues. But the Christians stayed behind to care for the sick and to bury the dead. They risked their own health to minister to others. As the Christians showed this uncharacteristic sacrificial love in a society that was entirely focused on self, people were attracted to it and the church grew in spite of the hardships and even persecution from the government.

So here's the question for us today. How do we love one another the way Jesus loves us? In particular, how do we love the people who are

difficult to love? How do we demonstrate that radical, sacrificial, surprising love to people who are outside the church, who don't have the same values we have? How do we love people in a way that surprises the world? Let's talk about it.

Amen.