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Twenty-first Sunday after Pentecost

Sermons

from The Church of the Covenant

“Life Beyond Love”

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Pastoral Prayer
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John 13:31–38

³¹When he had gone out, Jesus said, “Now the Son of Man has been glorified, and God has been glorified in him. ³²If God has been glorified in him, God will also glorify him in himself and will glorify him at once.³³Little children, I am with you only a little longer. You will look for me; and as I said to the Jews so now I say to you, ‘Where I am going, you cannot come.’ ³⁴I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. ³⁵By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.” ³⁶Simon Peter said to him, “Lord, where are you going?” Jesus answered, “Where I am going, you cannot follow me now; but you will follow afterward.” ³⁷Peter said to him, “Lord, why can I not follow you now? I will lay down my life for you.” ³⁸Jesus answered, “Will you lay down your life for me? Very truly, I tell you, before the cock crows, you will have denied me three times.

John 18:15–18, 25–27

¹⁵Simon Peter and another disciple followed Jesus. Since that disciple was known to the high priest, he went with Jesus into the courtyard of the high priest, ¹⁶but Peter was standing outside at the gate. So the other disciple, who was known to the high priest, went out, spoke to the woman who guarded the gate, and brought Peter in. ¹⁷The woman said to Peter, “You are not also one of this man’s disciples, are you?” He said, “I am not.” ¹⁸Now the slaves and the police had made a charcoal fire because it was cold, and they were standing around it and warming themselves. Peter also was standing with them and warming himself.²⁵Now Simon Peter was standing and warming himself. They asked him, “You are not also one of his disciples, are you?” He denied it and said, “I am not.” ²⁶One of the slaves of the high priest, a relative of the man whose ear Peter had cut off, asked, “Did I not see you in the garden with him?” ²⁷Again Peter denied it, and at that moment the cock crowed.

“Life Beyond Love”
John 13:31–38; John 18:15–18, 25–27

In a sermon I preached last summer, I talked about a phrase I learned in a seminary class called Marriage and Family Systems. The phrase was this: you marry the right person for all the wrong reasons. So it surprised me recently when a colleague of mine told me about an article by the philosopher Alain de Botton on the state of the modern marriage. In the article, de Botton wastes no time getting to the point. He begins like this:

*It’s one of those things we are most afraid might happen to us.
We go to great lengths to avoid it.
And yet we do it all the same:
We marry the wrong person.¹*

In explaining why this happens, de Botton points out that the closer we get to someone and the better we know them, the more aware we become of their imperfections and idiosyncrasies and all the ways they fail to live up to our often unspoken and unconscious expectations. In his words,

*We seem normal only to those who don’t know us
very well. In a wiser, more self-aware society than our own,
a standard question on any early dinner date would be:
“And how are you crazy?”*

De Botton argues that becoming disenchanted with a romantic partner is a democratic experience – it happens to everyone. And although his focus is on romantic partnerships, most of us also discover sooner or later that such disenchantment does not just apply to marriage. The closer we are to someone – whether that someone is a partner, a family member, or a friend – the more we witness their quirks and annoying habits and the more likely we are to question why we stay with this relationship.

My colleague who told me about this theory takes it one step further. He applies it not just to relationships between people but relationships between people and institutions, and specifically, between people and their churches. Stay in a church long enough, he says, and you will get disenchanted. Why? Because churches are full of people, and people are wildly inconsistent and consistently imperfect. Stay in a church long enough and chances are you may start to think you’ve made a mistake. *You may think you’ve joined the **wrong** church.²*

¹ https://www.nytimes.com/2016/05/29/opinion/sunday/why-you-will-marry-the-wrong-person.html?_r=0

² http://day1.org/8022-tim_boggess_why_you_will_join_the_wrong_church

I suspect Jesus knows that this is exactly what's going to happen to all of us, because **it's what happened from the very beginning**. On the last night of his earthly life, according to the gospel of John, Jesus spent a long and intimate evening with his disciples, sharing a last meal with them, imparting wisdom they can ponder after he's gone, and taking time to kneel down and wash the feet of these wildly inconsistent, consistently imperfect, and maddeningly thick-headed men who are his closest friends. Before he leaves them, the most important thing Jesus does is **teach** them in word and in deed – about love. The love he tries to show them and tell them about is love that goes far beyond affection or excitement or erotic desire or heady emotion. Jesus teaches his disciples about a love that goes beyond anything they have ever experienced, because it is a love manifested in the world for the first time in human form in the person of Jesus Christ, God incarnate, God's love in the flesh.

Although Jesus goes to great lengths that night to teach his disciples the nature of this love, the disciples fail to grasp it – as Jesus already knows they will. “Where I am going now, you cannot come,” he tells them. “Where I am going, you cannot follow me now, but you will follow me afterwards.” Jesus has been trying for some time now to prepare his disciples for what is going to happen to him – betrayal, crucifixion, resurrection – but on this last night he seems resigned to the fact that they are not going to be able to grasp any of this until after it happens, and even then, it's going to be a long process of understanding just what Jesus's life, death, and resurrection was all about.

Jesus also knows that before the disciples can begin to understand the kind of love he has for them and for the whole world, they are going to have to come to terms with some of their own shortcomings. “Very truly, I tell you,” Jesus says to Peter, who has never wanted anything more than to be the disciple who gets it and who loves and understands Jesus most and best of all, “Very truly, I tell you, before the cock crows, you will have denied me three times.” Despite Peter's vehement denial that he would ever do such a thing, it happens, and the only thing worse for Peter than the denial itself is just how easily and accurately Jesus predicted it.

When Richard Rohr's mother was on her deathbed, she kept talking about “a mesh” that she couldn't get through, something that was keeping her from letting go and surrendering to the death that was inevitable. Rohr sat by her bed and told her how much he would miss her. “I want to hear that from Daddy,” she said. Daddy was what they all called Rohr's father, her husband, and he came over to the bed and told her how much he would miss her. She replied, “I don't believe it.” Rohr was horrified. “Mother,” he said, “you're a few hours from death. You can't say that!” But she said it again, “I don't believe it.” Rohr's father looked his wife in the eye and said, “I ask your forgiveness for all the times I've hurt you in our fifty-four years of marriage, and I forgive you for all the times you've hurt me.” Rohr said, “Mother, isn't that

beautiful? Now say that back to Daddy.” But she closed her mouth and shook her head. She didn’t want to say it. Rohr said, “Mother, you’re soon going to be before God. You don’t want to come before God without forgiving everybody.” “I forgive everybody,” she said. Rohr said, “But do you forgive Daddy?” And she was silent...

In recalling this moment, Rohr writes, “My siblings and I still don’t know how Daddy hurt Mother. But any married person knows there are many little ways a couple hurt one another over fifty-four years.” So he took his mother’s hand and told her to put one hand on her heart. He told her, “I’m going to pray your heart gets real soft,” and he held her hand and kissed it.

After a moment she spoke, “When you kiss my hand like that, now I’ve got to do it.” And then, “I’m a stubborn woman. All my life I’ve been a stubborn woman.” “Mother, we all know that,” Rohr said, “Now look at Daddy and tell him.” She looked over and spoke her husband’s name, “Rich,” she said, “I forgive you.” And after a few deep breaths she said, “Rich, I ask your forgiveness.” And after a few breaths more she said, “That’s it, that’s it. That’s what I had to do.”³

On their last night together, with just thirty-two words, Jesus offers his disciples a summation of the whole gospel:

“Love one another.

Just as I have loved you, so you should also love one another.

*By this everyone will know that you are my disciples,
if you have love for one another.”*

I think the reason we usually relegate this teaching to one weeknight service a year – Maundy Thursday – is because it is so hard for us to hear and really understand. When he’s got one last chance to tell us what he wants us to know, Jesus doesn’t say,

“Hold each other accountable,”

or “Resist temptation,”

or “Follow those ten commandments,”

or “Give all your money to the church,”

*or even, “Make me proud.”*⁴

He tells us to love one another, even when it’s hard, even when it doesn’t feel good, even after we have betrayed one another in a thousand big and small ways. Even then, God calls us to remember **how Jesus showed love** – by **washing the feet** of those who misunderstood him and would betray him, and then by **dying on a cross** – *for those same disciples and for all of us*. God calls us to love one another in just this way.

³ <https://cac.org/the-power-of-forgiveness-2017-08-27/>

⁴ David Lose, “32 Words,” *Dear Working Preacher*, April 25, 2010. <http://www.workingpreacher.org/craft.aspx?post=1535>

In his article about how we all choose the wrong spouse, de Botton has some advice; he suggests that we swap out the romantic view of marriage – the stuff of expensive destination weddings, romantic comedies, and fairy tales – and he recommends we swap that for a view of marriage that is decidedly more **pessimistic**, not to mention realistic. He advises us to accept that every human being (and, I would add, every human institution) “will frustrate, anger, annoy, madden and disappoint us – and we will (without any malice) do the same to them.” This awareness can help us value our relationships not so much by how our partners, friends, or colleagues make us *feel*, but how well we can navigate our disagreements with them. What makes relationships meaningful, valuable, and satisfying is not when we share everything in common, but when we develop our mutual capacity to tolerate our differences and disagreements with generosity and grace.

When Ben started middle school, he decided he wanted to develop a whole new persona. The youngest of three kids, he was tired of being seen as the “baby,” and so he decided to become the tough guy. That’s how, just a couple of weeks into the school year, he found himself at the center of a crowd on the playground, beating up a kid he didn’t know who had challenged him earlier in the day. Ben had never been in a fight before, and he was uncovering talents he didn’t know he had. He landed a couple of good punches to the other kid’s mouth, and soon the kid was bleeding badly. But Ben didn’t stop; something inside him was fueling him and he kept landing punches. At one point, he grabbed the necklace around the kid’s neck and yanked it off.

Predictably, by the next morning, Ben was in the principal’s office with his horrified parents. They begged the principal to give Ben another chance instead of suspension or expulsion. Ben learned that the kid he beat up had a heart condition – the necklace he’d been wearing was a medical ID tag – and that, luckily, he was okay. That night, Ben’s parents called him into their bedroom. Ben knew this was the moment of reckoning – he was in huge trouble. What he never could have anticipated is what happened next: his *parents* **apologized** to *him*. “We’ve realized that we haven’t been there for you lately,” they said. “We’ve been preoccupied with your brother and sister and we just thought you were okay, but now we know that was a mistake. We want to spend more time with you, to make sure you get and stay on the right path. We love you and we’re sorry.”⁵

This is the kind of love that Jesus both speaks of and demonstrates on the last night of his life, as he prepares to sacrifice himself that the world might catch a glimpse of love’s potential – even in the face of betrayal, and misunderstandings, and disagreements, and unthinkable violence and suffering. Jesus shows us what it looks

⁵ From a story told by Ben Graham at the first Real.Life.Stories event at Grace Covenant Presbyterian Church, Asheville, NC, Feb. 10, 2013.

like when we move beyond our romantic notions of love as the good feelings that come when we all just get along and seem to agree...the kind of love God shows us in Jesus is only possible when we are brutally and beautifully honest about all the things we *don't* share in common and we *don't* agree on...and then when we exercise forgiveness, compassion, and even humor to find a way forward, *together*.

This is the most valuable and important example that Christ's church can set for a world that is exceedingly, and increasingly, **divided**. It is *not* to wall ourselves off with people who see things the same way we do, but to *willingly and honestly show up*, flawed and vulnerable and inconsistent as we are, show up, admit our differences, and engage them together. *This is what life beyond love looks like*. It is what God has shown us and it is what Jesus promises is possible. *Together*, may we make it so.

Amen.

Pastoral Prayer
Kevin J. Lowry

Let us now come together in the spirit of prayer.

Holy One, we gather together as your people united in a faith that lived through love. We come to be fed by your unwavering and holy presence in our lives, poured down through your spirit and your word made flesh in Jesus. This morning we bring our hearts into this holy place, where we are blessed and receive your abundant grace. We sing our thanks and praise O God for all that we have in our lives as we come to worship you, creator of all things. We come as your humble servants – here to serve your people and your kingdom right here and right now.

God of love, in this moment and in this place you are with us. You partner with us in the ordinary moments of our daily life and you are with us as we live a life beyond our human understanding. As we extend compassion and justice in each of our relationships, we express your unwavering love to our neighbors and to ourselves. As we feed the hungry, clothe the naked, tend to the sick, care for the poor, and love everyone, we are building your kingdom where all may live in freedom.

God of Justice, you call us in to this place to hear your words and you call us out into the world to be your hands. You call us into community and out into service for all people. You call us into right-relationship with one another and you call us out to live a life of love and compassion for all of your creation. You call us O Lord to live beyond, to extend our compassion, and to seek justice for everyone.

In your holy presence we bring our prayers to you O Lord, so that you may hear what is on our hearts and minds.

We pray for our world community, that where there is violence there may be peace. Where there is greed and corruption may there be generosity and righteousness.

We pray for our nation, that where there is division may there be wholeness. Where there is fear and hate, may there be love; May we be a nation that welcomes the foreigner, the stranger, and the forgotten among us; and where there is discrimination and oppression may we have the eyes to see that we are all your children

We pray for the cities and the communities in which we are a part. We pray for those who lead our cities, towns and villages that they may guide us to be communities of love and justice for all their citizens, without exception.

We pray for all those in our University Circle Neighborhood, for the patients, families and employees of local hospitals; for the students, faculty and staff at Case Western Reserve University, Cleveland Institute of Art and Cleveland Institute of Music and all the local colleges and universities.

We lift up all the prayers that have been said in this sanctuary throughout the week by our neighbors.

We pray for our church community, that together we can gather freely at God's table where no-one is excluded and everyone is welcomed. Where there is division within our church family we seek healing and wholeness.

We pray for those gathered here and those who are not with us this morning. We pray for those in our community especially Judy, Andrew, Akeya, Rich, Thelma, Eliseo, Anne Marie, Greg, Elizabeth, Patrick, Robert, Tom, Rory, Liam, Gabe, Doug, and for all those in our covenant community who may be suffering at this moment.

We lift up all those prayers that remain in our hearts...

God, we come to both give and receive your love and justice as we share in your kingdom here and now. Together we pray **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.**