

Love Without Exception

Sermon by Pastor Patrick Fish

Easter 5

May 18-19, 2019

John 13:31-35

"I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another."

—John 13:34-35

Grace and peace to you from Christ, who knows you by name. Who loves you. Who calls you to love. That is how we continue to be connected to him and how the world we know we belong to you. Amen.

Move 1: Lack of belonging in church growing up

Growing up, church wasn't really my thing. I've shared that with a number of you. My parents tried having me go to church every Sunday. And I would be physically in church, but not really my whole self.

I sang songs that I didn't really relate to. My dad would sing in his frog voice, super loudly, thinking if I saw him doing that, I would all of a sudden love church and want to be there more.

Scripture always entailed a story about a guy with a weird name and a woman with a normal name. In the town there lived Zechariah and his wife, Elizabeth. The man Boaz was star struck when he met a woman name Ruth. The father Laban had a second daughter and her name: Rachel.

My priest growing up gave a homily, which was always way over my head and felt more like a book report than a message. But he did have a bad joke at the beginning that made us giggle out of nervousness and awkwardness.

To be frank, church growing up just didn't engage me. It didn't feel like a place that was for me. It felt forced, stuffy, and inauthentic.

My Christian faith formation experience wasn't much different. My teachers tried their hardest. I appreciated them because I knew they were volunteering and giving of their free time to be with Cheetos-fingered, snot-nosed kids.

They taught the biblical stories. I knew the basics about God. But, again, none of it felt like it applied to me. I never knew God. The Bible felt irrelevant. God felt distant. Church felt like a place I didn't belong or want to belong.

For me, growing up, sports was my religion. It was what got my full attention. It was what I cared about. Sports teams were where I experienced belonging. My mentors and people I looked up to were not priests or teachers from the church; they were my coaches.

They were people who would spend extra time after practice with me, one-on-one, to teach me a specific skill. Who would take me aside after I had struck out and say, "Get the next one, kid." Who would call me at home to check up on how I was doing after I got injured in practice.

Looking back, I realize they were my spiritual leaders, my mentors. They may never thought they were modeling and following Christ. But, to me, they were. They didn't just know God, they *lived* God. Didn't just quote Scripture; they *lived* it.

My coaches taught me the important principle I still live with today: Kids don't care how much you know until they know how much you care.

My priests and faith teachers knew a lot about faith. They tried teaching me the material. But I never felt love in the church. I never felt that my priest cared about me as an individual. I was just another kid. Another sheep in his flock.

My coaches cared. (The ones I looked up to, that is.) They cared not just about me as a player, but me as a person.

Move 2: Belonging experienced in this world

The issue, though, is that the belonging I thought I had in sports became warped and distorted. It began in middle school, when sports was no longer just about belonging and teamwork.

I was always competitive and wanted to win. But, despite my striving to win at all costs, my coaches in elementary school would always remind me and the team, "Just have fun. Enjoy playing together." It was about all of us playing. Learning the skills. Being one team.

Well, in middle school, that shifted. You could get cut from the school basketball team. You were judged on your merit. You played if you were good. You sat bench if you weren't good enough.

I was a point guard on our B team. Not the A team. I was second-tier talent. Coaches were no longer as interested in me. They were interested in the really good players, the ones who had worth.

My sense of belonging started to fall apart. Where did I belong? Where was I accepted? My family. Well, yeah, but they have to. For much of middle school and high school, I tried to belong. I bounced around different friend groups. I kept with sports. But there was always something missing. Something off.

I was experiencing conditional love. My sports teams would love me ... if I produced for the team. My friend group would love me ... if I behaved and acted like they did.

I was without a place where I really felt welcomed, affirmed, loved. I was an angry, lost kid. All those feelings, all that stuff, I carried with me.

I didn't have a place where I truly belonged. I couldn't just *be*. I had to pretend I was good, that I had my stuff together. I came to believe I had to earn my place, that I had to achieve and accomplish in order to be accepted by others.

Move 3: College

That all changed in college. I went to college thinking I would play football. But I had this feeling that it wasn't for me anymore. I had tried that. It didn't work. I wanted to try something different.

That's when I met the campus pastor, and he invited me to a campout. On that campout a group of campus ministry students welcomed me. The campus pastor kept reaching out to me. The peers and students I met, we kept hanging out. They became my peeps.

And when I didn't show up to church, when I said I'd come to Bible study but didn't because "Lost" (my favorite show) was on, I wasn't thrown away. I wasn't judged. They just kept inviting me. Welcoming me. Loving me.

They didn't wait until I behaved a certain way. They didn't judge me based on what I believed or didn't believe. They just accepted me.

And for the first time, at nineteen years old, I had a place I belonged.

And because I felt I could just show up and that was okay, I was open to learning what it meant to behave, walk, and follow Christ. And that led me for the first time not to just knowing about God, but truly believing in God. God was no longer an old white guy in the sky. God was Jesus. In the flesh. Who came down. Joined in our mess. Ate with sinners. Died and rose. For me. For the world.

Once grace took hold of my life, and my life was never the same.

From time to time, I still fall back into my old ways of thinking that I have to earn my way. That my worth is based on what I do, what I achieve. When I get that way, I remind myself, "That's my stuff I carry. Let go. Let God."

Move 4: God loves without exception

I have come to know and believe God loves without exception. It's the one truth that we all need to hear. Deserve to hear. And cannot hear enough.

Being in ministry, I have learned over and over that my story isn't that uncommon. That many of us have questions. Doubts. Wanderings. Many of us have yearned to find a place to belong. Longed to find a community where being ourselves, our real, true selves, was okay.

Friends, brothers, and sisters, this is that place. This is that space. I am forever grateful to be here. I feel so blessed that my children, my girls, will get an experience I had to wait for. They are already getting it.

This is a faith community where you can bring all your stuff. Where you can just *be*, and that's okay. Where we don't just say all are welcome, come as you are, we mean it. *All* means all.

This is a place of belonging. Where we don't expect people to all agree, to all be the same. You don't have to believe like me or act like me. You can just *be*. Be you. And belong. Belong to the body of Christ. Belong to the God who first loved you.

We aren't in the business of creating little Patricks and Pats. Little Lutherans who think, act, worship, and serve exactly the same way. We are a space and place where we proclaim God's love. Without exception. Where no one is outside God's love. Where even a hot-headed kid who used to think that church was outdated can come to belong, love God, and love church.

God's love has no exception. It extends to the lost and found alike. To those who have grown up in the church, to those who have been burned by the church, to those who thought church was a pointless place.

That is the love that Jesus proclaims, models, and lives out in his ministry.

Move 5: Scripture

That is what we hear in today's Scripture. Jesus is about to depart from this world and is preparing his disciples for how they are to continue his work. Continue to be connected when he is physically not here.

We face the same question: How do we continue his work and continue to be connected to him?

The answer is in Jesus's commandment: Love. Love one another. Just as Jesus promises his disciples that God will give them an "Advocate," "the Spirit of truth" to be with them (John 14:16-17), we have the same Holy Spirit living within us and leading us. Jesus calls this a "new" commandment. Which weird, at first, since loving neighbor is all over the Old Testament. How is this a *new* command? [1]

It's new because this love isn't self-serving love. It's not self-interest love. Conditional love. Christ calls us to sacred love. To hard love. To love that is not about competition, conquest, and colonization. To love that isn't about being right. To love that is identified by the basin and towel, as Jesus' demonstrated when he washed the feet of the disciples. [2]

Jesus wasn't able to reach every person. He was limited to a specific time and place in human history. He knew his time was coming to an end. But he wanted the world to experience this love. He knew what every person in all of history has needed: to know they are loved. Cared for. Deeply.

He knows for that to happen, we must take the baton and continue it forward. This commandment Jesus gives us isn't a bumper sticker; it's a way of living, a way of orienting ourselves. It challenges us.

This sacred love isn't just for those like us. Insiders. It's for all. Our love of Christ is forever now linked to our love of neighbor. Jesus makes this clear. This command to love is not personal. Between us and Jesus. It's public. Between us and the world.

This sacred love is not one-directional, just on God. It's omni-directional. It's a love for the neighbor in every direction. [3]

Move 6: Belong. Behave. Believe

For too long we have taught and been taught that our foundation starts with BELIEF. That the most important thing is believing. Once a person confesses his/her belief in Jesus, learns what is expected of him/her to do, how to behave, then they are Christians. Then they belong to the body of Christ.

BELIEVE. BEHAVE. BELONG.

Jesus didn't work that way. The Book of Acts, the early disciples, they didn't operate this way. Jesus didn't call people who believed perfectly or were exactly like him. In fact, he called common people to leadership. Included people with no proper training. He didn't force them to act a certain way before he embraced them as his disciples.

First, he called the disciples by name. Opened his arms to them. Loved them. Then, he showed them the way. What his ministry entailed.

Jesus does the same today.

It's first about BELONGING. We need to know we belong, that we are loved. Not the love we experience in this world: self-maintaining love. We need sacred love. Once we experience and encounter that love, know that we are okay just being us with all our stuff, then we come to learn how to follow and walk in the way of Jesus. And only after participating and learning the way do we come to believe. Really believe this grace thing, this resurrection thing. This love applies to me.

Jesus models for us our way forward and how we pattern how we do things:

BELONG. BEHAVE. BELIEVE.

This means we don't expect all of us to be the same. We don't reject people different from us. Instead, we love all. Without exception. So everyone, like us, can experience that place of belonging.

Can you hear that good news we all need to hear? That, despite our stuff, we are loved. Deeply. Cared for. Deeply.

Move 7: Video

To end, I want to show a video that illustrates what St. Mark's already is. And what I know we will continue to be: A faith community known by our love for one another. A safe place. A place where God's love is proclaimed. Where God's love is lived out in ways that allow people to bring their real selves and hear they belong. Where God's love leads us to affirm all people who walk through our doors so they know that they, like us, are loved.

"Stuff"

Video by Floodgate Productions

Description: We all carry stuff—some good, some not so good. And when we come to church, it's easy to leave our stuff in the parking lot, then walk into the church building with a smile, as if our stuff doesn't really exist. But what if the invitation from Christ is something different, and what if your church can communicate that invitation with clarity and inspiration?

<https://www.sermonspice.com/product/72254/stuff>

Whatever your journey is, whatever your stuff is, know that *nothing* excludes you from God's love. Hear that truth. Experience that truth.

Amen.

Resources

[1] Vena, Osvaldo. "Commentary on John 13:31-35," workingpreacher.org, May 19, 2019.

[2] Vena, Osvaldo. "Commentary on John 13:31-35."

[3] Lewis, Karoline. "Real Love," [Dear WorkingPreacher](http://DearWorkingPreacher.com), workingpreacher.org. May 12, 2019.

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Reflection Questions

- How does Jesus' command to love one another challenge you?
- In what ways is the story of the Gentiles receiving the gift of the Holy Spirit still relevant today?
- When have you felt you belonged and what was that feeling like?