

“Love One Another”
A Sermon Preached by Frank Mansell III
John Knox Presbyterian Church – Indianapolis, Indiana
May 13, 2012

John 15: 9-17

This passage from John is the last of three Sundays when we have focused on Jesus’ words to his disciples from the fourth gospel. Two weeks ago, we reflected on Jesus as the good shepherd, and last Sunday we heard Jesus call himself the true vine. Now, today, we hear Jesus speak of loving one another as he has loved us. He does not speak in analogies, or compare himself to someone or something. He simply states: “This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you” (15:12).

I find it interesting that a form of the word “love” is used eight times in these nine verses. And Jesus repeats the phrase “love one another” within six verses of each other. There is no doubt what the central theme of his speech is: love one another as I have loved you. And considering the previous two weeks, it is clear how Jesus has loved us. He lays down his life for us, as a shepherd lays down his life for his sheep. Our life of faith is rooted in the vine of God’s goodness – Jesus Christ – and we are loved by him in order to bear fruit for his kingdom. We know how Jesus loves each of us.

But how do we love one another as he has loved us? It is one thing to say that; it is quite another thing to do it. It is one thing to read that; it is quite another thing to believe it. It is one thing to try that; it is quite another thing to live it each and every day. How do we love one another as Christ has loved us?

Maybe one place to start is to realize that the first step taken in this relationship was by him, not by us. There is a great deal of emphasis in fundamentalist, evangelical circles of faith to “choose Jesus,” to “be converted,” to “find your Savior,” almost like he was lost or something. For many Christians, there is a conversion moment in one’s life when that individual chooses to follow Jesus. I’m not saying that is wrong, because for all of us we need to acknowledge when we purposefully and acutely discovered God was with us in Jesus Christ. But I do believe this line of thought deceives the believer into thinking he or she is choosing God’s love for them. The truth is that choice was already made by God, and it is Jesus Christ.

One commentator describes it in the following way: *In John 15, we find an interesting statement by Jesus to his followers, “You did not choose me but I chose you. And I appointed you to go and bear fruit . . .” (15:16). Most of us think of our religion as something that we have chosen. No, Jesus reminds his disciples that discipleship is his idea, not*

their idea. He reached out to them and declared them to be his followers before they reached out to him.

*Our faith in God rests upon the choices of God, rather than upon our efforts. We love because God first loved us. We, who were once enemies of God, have been called friends by Christ (15:15). Why is this text, spoken by Jesus before his crucifixion, found here in Eastertide? I think it may be because it is a good reminder that our God is a living God. Our God is not an abstract idea, a detached notion, or a set of beliefs. Our God is a living God who reaches, intrudes, comes to us, and chooses US (William Willimon, "God's Choices," *Pulpit Resource*, April-May-June 2006, 38-39).*

In other words, we are not given a choice about which God will be our God, or whether we will be loved by that God. That choice has already been made – Jesus says so today: “You did not choose me but I chose you.” It is not up to us to make the shrewd choice regarding our salvation, or make all the conditions perfect for God to look favorably upon us. We are not in control when it comes to God’s love – it has already been decided, transacted, commissioned, and the deal has been closed. God has chosen us out of the goodness of God’s heart, to love us, to save us, to redeem us through Jesus our Lord. “You did not choose me but I chose you.”

What might that feel like for us? For any of us who have known our families, our parents, our siblings – they are a part of our lives which we did not choose. For any of us who have had children, they are a part of our lives which we did not choose. For any of us who have been married, even though we may have chosen who we fell in love with, we still did not know fully our spouse until we started living together. How do we respond to those people in our lives for whom we did not have a choice?

William Willimon says the following: *Nobody knows what he or she is getting into as a husband or wife, a parent or child. [Even though we prepare for these people in certain ways] the trick is to prepare for a lifetime of commitment to someone who is always changing. How can you prepare for how annoying another person can be when he or she is so close to you so early each morning? How can you prepare for all the ways a child will challenge you, disappoint you, worst of all, come to look just like you only to desert you for college?*

You can't. And because you can't, what you need is some means of being part of an adventure, which you can't control, the end result of which you do not fully understand. Morally, we move into the future on the basis of the commitments that we made without knowing what we were getting into.

What you need . . . is some means of turning your fate into your destiny. As Christians, our faith provides us the means to live together as parents, children, husbands, wives – [as children of God]. You didn't choose Jesus to be your Savior. He came to us, not the other way

around. John's Gospel makes this explicit: Jesus says to his disciples, "You did not choose me. I chose you so that you might bear fruit" (15:16). Life cannot be mainly about our choice and our decision since the Bible says that God must save us by what we cannot have by our efforts or striving. The Bible, its stories of folk who were commandeered by God for God's work, is a long story of God's continued determination to love us even when we are unloving and unlovable.

The gospel is also the story of God's continued commitment to make us into people who can be depended upon to love even strangers since we have learned, in Christ, what it's like to be a stranger and to be loved, even when we didn't deserve it . . . Because God has chosen us and continues to feed us and to care for us, we are enabled to be free from our modern obsessions with safety and control in order to risk being faithful, even to those whom we didn't choose (ibid).

Two experiences this week have reminded me of how God chooses us first through Jesus Christ, and how we are given all that we need to respond to that gracious act of love with lives of discipleship.

The first is what will happen this morning around this baptismal bowl. DaKota Gagna will receive the sacrament of baptism today in worship. It will mark the beginning of her Christian journey, the start of her life of discipleship, acknowledging that God has loved her first through Jesus Christ, and everything which follows is her thank-offering for that gift. These waters represent the cleansing nature of God's grace, which marks each of us as God's own children. The waters of baptism represent a sacramental way in which we respond with joy to God's gracious choice to love us unconditionally.

The second was when we celebrated the life of Bob Bourne on Friday here in this sanctuary. I was reminded that God chooses each of us - whether we are old or young, long-time members or recent disciples - and claims us to serve. On Friday, I prayed, "We thank you for your servant, Bob Bourne, whose baptism is now complete in death." A service of witness to the resurrection is our chance in worship to acknowledge how God claims us through the waters of baptism, and then how we have returned thanks to God for that gracious act with a lifetime of service. Loving one another is more than a motto; it is a life-long response of thanksgiving to the one who first chose to love us in Jesus Christ our Lord.

How we love one another reflects directly on how we believe our lives are set in motion: as people chosen by God, or as people who choose what lives they will live. "This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you." Let us follow our God with our Savior, Jesus Christ, who has chosen to love us today, tomorrow, and all of our days.

Thanks be to God. Amen.