

Thirsty

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John 15: 9-17

1 John 5:1-6

Today first I want to read to you a passage from John15, verses 9-17.

⁹As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love. ¹⁰ If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commandments and abide in his love. ¹¹ I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete.

¹² "This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you.

¹³ No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends.

¹⁴ You are my friends if you do what I command you. ¹⁵ I do not call you servants any longer, because the servant does not know what the master is doing; but I have called you friends, because I have made known to you everything that I have heard from my Father. ¹⁶You did not choose me but I chose you. And I appointed you to go and bear fruit, fruit that will last, so that the Father will give you whatever you ask him in my name. ¹⁷ I am giving you these commands so that you may love one another."

This scripture is part of Jesus' farewell discourse to his disciples. In it he is giving them instructions as to how to go on, what steps to take next. Immediately before this excerpt Jesus talks of the vine and the branches – how he is the vine and they are the branches, and that apart from him they can do nothing. This gives the disciples and us the context for where to plug in to the supernatural grid, as it were.

After hearing this scripture, it will come as no surprise that I want to talk today about love. I will consider several questions –

What is love?

Why should we love?

Whom should we love?

How should we love?

On the first question what is love, we all have ideas about natural human love. It is a basic human need. It is that feeling of putting another's needs before our own, and is learnt as a baby, when our needs are met by our parents. Children in orphanages who are not loved will fail to thrive, and even die, no matter that their physical needs have been taken care of. Love is one of the many ways in which we are made in God's image – we love because God first loved us. (1 John 4:19) There are different kinds of love, and the ancient Greeks had three different

words for love. There is the physical sort of love, as between a husband and wife. There is brotherly love, which can be between anyone.

Thirdly, there is the sort of love God has for us, a love which would lay down its life without hesitation. This love is like an undeserved favour – God loves us anyway, in spite of all we have done. It is sometimes translated as merciful lovingkindness, and many of the Psalms comment on this attribute of God. The height of God’s love was in sacrificing himself on the cross, so we can be reconciled with Him. If we believe in God, we have a responsibility to accept His sacrifice, and follow his commandments. A lot of people say they believe in God, but accept no responsibility or accountability.

Why should we love?

Well, because we are made in His image, and He loved us first. We are told directly in John’s gospel “This is my commandment, that you love one another, as I have loved you”. Imagine a world where everyone did just that. No more wars, no more hunger. It might have an effect on the stock exchange too. I read a comment once that Ghandi said that if all the Christians did what they were commanded to do, referring to love, the world would be transformed. Actually, the world **was** transformed when Christians started showing love. With the monastic orders, hospitals were set up, and education and science flourished. The poor, sick and unwanted were taken care of, and not just abandoned, as had been the practice in much of the pagan Ancient World. Of course, God’s chosen people, Israel, were already following His commandments, and ministering to the brokenness of the world around them. Love is the very essence of the Torah.

We are part of the continuity of God’s people, and Jesus teaches us how to fulfil the spirit of the commandments – the Pharisees were very good at keeping all sorts of laws, but missed the point when they didn’t act out of love. There is another reason why we should love. As we heard in the reading, Jesus says:

“I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete.”

That means that loving others will bring joy into our lives! What a blessing! Acts 20:35 says that it is more blessed to give than to receive, and as we give in love, so we are blessed by the joy of the Lord! That joy is not in relation to our circumstances, but floods us when we least expect it.

And that brings us to the next question - whom should we love? Jesus tells us that if we love him, then we also love those he loves. That means everyone! Not just our immediate family. Not just our friends, and other like-minded people. Not just people who look, think and smell like us. Not just healthy or sane people, and not just nice people. And not just people we know.

I believe we are called, indeed commanded, to love every single human being on this planet. God's love and generosity is bestowed on everyone – rain falls and the sun shines for everyone. Loving our family can be difficult. Actually, they can be the hardest of all to love, because of past hurts, and if we feel they have let us down. This feeling is not a Godly thing – it's probably implanted by the Enemy, and can really bind us up.

As we mature as Christians and as people, we realize that everyone will let us down, at some time or another. We cannot rely on other people to fulfill all our needs. Only God can do that, and when we accept this fact, relationships get easier, because we know that we are free to love people, regardless of whether they meet our needs. I was talking to a friend about this, and she told me that she used to try and keep her husband happy, so he could keep her happy. Then she realised what a waste of time it was, to let your own happiness depend on someone else's mood. He might have been grumpy about a sore tooth, or work, and she used to let that determine her happiness.

Loving others has no conditions or out-clauses – it is not conditional on the behaviour of the other person. The story of the Prodigal Son shows us what unconditional love can be like. The son was forgiven of his sins, and welcomed with open arms. It can be hard to love annoying people, angry people, violent people. We are not called to be doormats, and accept their behaviour. But we are called to love **them**, and forgive what they do. Love the person, hate the sin.

Sometimes loving a person means doing something they don't like, or can't understand. Disciplining little children is like this. In all our relationships, there may be times when the most loving action is seen as unkind. And that brings me to the next point, about where we start.

How do we love? I believe the first thing to do is pray for other people. We can pray when there is a difficulty in a relationship, when we don't know what to say or do. We can pray for needs to be met, and for healing. Prayer is a way of loving people whom we **don't** see, struggling Christians in Palestine, flood victims in Bangladesh, gang members in Otara.

Whenever we read in the newspapers of a need, we can pray. It moves mountains and affects lives. It should be our first response when seeing an ambulance speeding towards a car accident. When we hear a juicy bit of gossip, instead of planning who to tell first, we can bring the situation where people are hurting to the Throne room of God. Perhaps we can start by looking at the magazines in the dairy window, and praying for the celebrities who are getting divorced, or pregnant for the seventh time.

Loving also means forgiving, asking for forgiveness, not letting the sun go down on our wrath. It means letting go of past hurts, rather than rehearsing them over and over, and allowing the devil to gain a foothold into our minds. The devil

would love to see us so bound up with unforgiveness that we can't spread God's love and kingdom. Love also requires that we confront the sin within ourselves, removing the log from our own eye before tacking another's speck. We would be seen as hypocrites otherwise. That is a major criticism outsiders have of the church, and they seem to have very finely honed antennae for anything that might come across as not totally squeaky –clean. Of course, we know that God loves us anyway – I rather like the bumper bar sticker that stays, I'm not perfect, just forgiven.

Loving others means trying to see them as Christ sees them – a beloved Brother or Sister, adopted into God's Kingdom It means humbling oneself, and not trying to have the last word all the time, or win every argument. This can be very difficult behaviour to change in a family or work setting – we are so familiar with each other that we forget to see them through God's eyes.

Loving others means sharing the good things we have, and the foremost of these is membership of the Kingdom of Heaven. If we love someone, we want to be with them through eternity, and the only way to do that is through Salvation. Some of us feel that we are not called to be evangelists, and the idea of telling total strangers about our faith fills us with the desire to do a Jonah and run in the opposite direction. As the Bible says, **some** are called to be evangelists. It doesn't say **all** are called.

But there are ways in which we can promote God's Kingdom. We can live in such a way that people around us notice a difference, and then we can be prepared to answer them when they ask what drives us. We can support others who do have the calling of an evangelist. We can support new Christians, and those who are flagging a bit in their faith. In short, love them.

We are not alone when we set out to love. God's love flows into us constantly, and when we open the tap and let it flow out, even more will flow in. I remember when I was expecting my second child, pondering a question lots of mothers have asked over the ages – I love this first one so much, how will there be any left over for the new baby? Of course, when I held my second child in my arms, a whole new supply of love flowed.

God fills us so full that we never run dry. Love is infinite, because it comes from God, who is infinite. The more we experience God's love, the more we participate in His love for everyone else. Jesus has sent the Holy Spirit to be our helper, ever-present. As we become more attuned to the Holy Spirit's gentle voice, it gets easier to love. It won't always be easy, and sometimes it can tear our heart. But how much better to have a soft, malleable heart, than one of stone. I want to finish with a reading from 1 John 5:1-5:

¹Everyone who believes that Jesus is the Christ has been born of God, and everyone who loves the parent loves the child. ²By this we know that we love the

children of God, when we love God and obey his commandments. ³For the love of God is this, that we obey his commandments. And his commandments are not burdensome, ⁴for whatever is born of God conquers the world. And this is the victory that conquers the world, our faith. ⁵Who is it that conquers the world but the one who believes that Jesus is the Son of God?