

Being Easter People – Love
John 15:9-17
First Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)
May 9, 2021
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A pastor went to the hospital to visit Maggie, one of his members. She was in the last stages of her life because of cancer, and was heavily medicated, and unresponsive. He went to support her family, who was taking it hard. When he got there, he was surprised with what he saw. Her daughter, Kimmy, had taken the sheets and set them aside. She was putting lotion on her mother's body, and was starting at the feet. This was an expensive lotion, and was more than she could afford. As he walked in, Kimmy gave a mischievous smile and made him promise not to tell her children. Her kids gave it to her for Mother's Day, since, in their words, "you never do anything for yourself, Mom." As Kimmy put it on her mother, she was unresponsive. Maggie, nor anyone else, would never know the difference. *(Ref. Sermon Central, "Mom, That Was for You!" by Nickolas Kooi, August 30, 2017)*

In the scripture passage that we read last week, Jesus tells us, "Abide in me as I abide in you. Just as the branch cannot bear fruit by itself unless it abides in the vine, neither can you unless you abide in me." Our scripture passage this week is a branch of the parable of the Vine. Here Jesus speaks directly to what it means to abide in him. And the theme here is "love."

While the previous passage has no mention at all of love, this passage refers to love nine times. And not just the kind of love we mean when we say we "love" chocolate, or "love" a good book. No, this love is abiding, and it is sacrificial.

This passage is full of words that seem to jump off the page: "love; joy; friends; chosen; bear fruit." "Abide." While some in the Christian world focus on the word "chosen" in a misguided attempt to claim Jesus as theirs alone, we look at that word in the context of Jesus' disciples, who were being sent to share the good news of God's abiding love. Because of these whom Jesus chose, we all can claim ourselves to be heirs to and citizens of the realm of God. As citizens of that realm, we live, we abide, in the love of God. And the love of God abides in us. This love is inclusive; we are all chosen as inheritors of God's love, demonstrated through the ministry of Jesus Christ.

So what does it mean to abide in selfless, sacrificial love?

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

I used to wonder if I would ever feel that kind of love, that there would ever be someone I would consider dying for. Now, as a wife, mother and grandmother, I understand more fully that kind of love. But would I do that for a stranger? Or for someone I don't like or respect? I don't know. I'd like to think I would. As a recent meme on social media put it, "You will never look into the eyes of someone God does not love." As hard as that is to

comprehend, much less put into action, I know that many people have given their lives for people they have never met or people with whom they had nothing in common. Indeed, that willingness to die for another, no matter who that person might be, is the kind of love that Jesus himself exemplified.

I can think of many times throughout history that human beings gave of themselves so that others could live.

It happened on 9/11, when the passengers on Flight 93 crashed their plane to save the Capitol. It happened on that same day when rescue workers rushed into the World Trade Center towers to save victims of the attack.

It was evident in the actions of those who helped runaway slaves through the Underground Railroad.

It was also expressed in the lives of those who hid the Jewish people during the Holocaust

But does sacrificial love always involve trading your life for another's? Does it need to mean that our physical beings are threatened? Maybe sacrifice can be seen in other ways as well. Maybe sometimes it is in the most ordinary, seemingly small acts we do daily.

In the case of Kimmy, whose story we heard earlier, her love for her mother outweighed her own self-interest. She couldn't cure Maggie. So she did for Maggie what she could, without fanfare or self-congratulations. No one would ever know the difference. As the author of that story, Pastor Nickolas Kooi of Emmaus Lutheran Church in St. Paul, wrote, "But this is the nature of a self-sacrificial love. So what if these acts of love go unappreciated, or unnoticed? So what if no one ever knows these precious acts? God knows and sees these acts. They are not unnoticed, but are precious and valuable in His sight. Acts like these care for others and their needs. [They put] others first. These acts of love show the mercy and love of Jesus, and are motivated by them. They point us to Him."

Sacrificial loves happens when

- You give your seat to another on the bus.
- You serve a meal to a homeless person.
- You give a ride to someone who has no transportation.

Sacrificial love is cleaning the bathroom when you'd rather not, just so that your partner doesn't have to.

Sacrificial love is making sure everyone else is served dinner before serving yourself.

Sacrificial love is taking in your grown children and your grandchildren when they have nowhere else to go.

Sacrificial love is helping others recover from a natural disaster, even when you are also affected.

One of my favorite examples of this kind of love is a quote from writer Tenneva Jordan, which describes the love of a mother toward her family. It reads, "A mother is a person who, seeing there are only four pieces of pie for five people, promptly announces she never did care for pie."

This is the kind of love where we place the needs of others above our own needs.

In a University College of London's student publication, writer Karolay Lorenty says, "In the last few months, we have seen people refusing to wear masks and breaking social distancing measures, despite knowing that these rules could potentially save others' lives. In times like this, it is hard to believe that humans are inherently good. But, at the same time, we have also seen innumerable displays of altruism as nations have come together to fight against a common enemy. How can we reconcile these two opposing aspects of human nature?" (*Ref. Kinesis; the UCL Life Sciences Student Publication, September 7, 2020; "Humans: Selfish or altruistic? And does it matter?"*)

People are complex, and we are designed to help one another. That's just the way the human brain works. Psychologist and author of "Emotional Intelligence" Daniel Goleman, in a Ted Talk, says, "...this is, I think, the predicament of our lives: that we don't take every opportunity to help because our focus is in the wrong direction. There's a new field in brain science, social neuroscience. This studies the circuitry in two people's brains that activates while they interact.

"And the new thinking about compassion from social neuroscience is that our default wiring is to help. That is to say, if we attend to the other person, we automatically empathize, we automatically feel with them."

In light of our brains being wired to help, Goleman then poses the question, "Then why don't we?" He goes on to say, "...I think this speaks to a spectrum that goes from complete self-absorption, to noticing, to empathy and to compassion.

"And the simple fact is, if we are focused on ourselves, if we're preoccupied, as we so often are throughout the day, we don't really fully notice the other." (*Ref. Daniel Goleman Ted Talk "Why Aren't We All Good Samaritans?" November 10, 2020*)

When we strive to find Jesus within ourselves, we are more likely to see him in others. As we lift our noses out of our devices, look around and see the need that is everywhere, we renew the impulse to help. When we heed the needs of others, Jesus is present.

Sacrificial love requires us to pay attention, to empathize, and to act.

And friends, you know the strange thing about sacrificial love is the joy it brings, not only to the receiver, but to the giver of that love.

If you ask anyone who has ever been on a mission trip or work camp, or anyone who has helped rebuild a community following a disaster, they will tell you that the joy they got from the experience far surpassed what they felt they gave.

Some of you have heard John McKinstry talk about Nancy and Jamie's experience with the woman in Honduras, who gave up the bulk of her family's meal in hospitality for those who had come to help her community. This is sacrificial love. We can only imagine the joy it gave this woman to be able to provide for others.

During a work camp in Cedar Rapids in 2008, a group of First Christian Church workers joined with a church from Kansas City to help those who had been affected by the flood. One family fed us with a picnic dinner in their backyard, even though the inside of their home was uninhabitable. We might have felt more comfortable feeding them, but they were insistent on providing a meal for us. Sacrificial love. Joy in the giving.

Author Martha Sullivan, in her blog "herway," says "Selfless love is when other people's happiness is a reflection of our own." She goes on to say, "To be selfless means to take care of other people's happiness just as you take care of yours, because the only language that selfless love understands is the language of true love!"

But we also notice that part of this exhortation by Jesus is a commandment. This is a different kind of commandment than we see in the Old Testament laws. This commandment is at the heart of all humanity. This is the commandment to love. Those who keep this commandment -- like Kimmy with her mother; like those who give all they have in hospitality to others; like those who lay down their lives for people known and unknown; like those who put their fellow human beings before themselves -- they are keeping this commandment. They are abiding in Jesus. Their joy is full.

Each time we bear the burden of another, each time we lift another up, each time we put another person's well-being before our own, we are abiding in the love of Jesus. May we lean into that love with body, soul, heart and mind, and may we know the fullness of joy that comes from abiding in love. Amen.