

# “Beloved, Let Us Love One Another”

(a sermon based on I John 4:7-12, page 241 in the New Testament, NRSV pew Bible)

by

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As you know, Patty and I spent the past week on the beach in Jamaica celebrating our 30<sup>th</sup> wedding anniversary. As I wondered about what today’s sermon topic ought to be, I thought: How about “LOVE”? It’s the talk of the town just now, with the *marriage equality* court decision here in California. In fact, after worship, I’ll be showing the film “Tying the Knot” (in the Church House) a celebration of long-term loving commitments that have gone unsanctioned for so long, now being addressed in the open as civil laws are changed.

The first passage of Scripture that came to mind is the familiar text from the Apostle Paul used so often at weddings: First Corinthians 13: *“Love is patient; love is kind. Love does not envy, nor boast. It is not proud, rude, nor self-seeking. Love is not easily angered. It keeps no record of wrongs.”* Those words reminded me of a song from my college days: *“Thou shalt love the Lord thy God, with all thy heart, with all thy soul...”* (Tim Burtram, 1973)

That, in turn, brought back to mind the first letter of John, in which we are told that love is not so much in the fact that *we* love *God*, but that *God* loved *us* and sent Jesus to be the atoning sacrifice for our sin. *“Beloved, since God loves us so much, we also ought to love one another.”* (I John 4:11)

I suspect that most of you know that the New Testament (originally written in Greek) has three words for LOVE: *eros* (sexual, romantic love) as in *erotic*, that hormonal stimulating, titillating, and passionate love;

*philos* (a Platonic or "familial" love) as in *philosophia* (love of wisdom), and *phila-delphia* (brotherly-love); and the third word: *agape*.

*Agape*-love is other-centered, God-honoring, compassion -- a love that "comes alongside" your partner in mutual support & fulfillment. It is this third word which is the distinctively Christian attitude toward others: love.

However, human love – if it is to be rich, fulfilling, long-lasting – will have elements of all three kinds of love: *eros* (physical attraction), *philos* (a sense of kinship, a stimulating like-mindedness), and *agape* (care for one another). The best love is mutually felt, each partner holding the other in high regard; each one being the “cheerleader” for the other’s best efforts.

To speak about love from the pulpit reminds me of when I was a Campus Minister at Cal. State, Long Beach (the year before I came to Seaside), where Rabbi Ken Kaufman and I presented a discussion series that we called: "*The Rabbi & the Reverend*." It was an opportunity for students, staff, and faculty members of both faiths -- Jewish and Christian -- to meet together over lunch and discuss with the two of us our "traditional teachings" concerning a number of issues.

One of our topics was: "Love, Sex, and Marriage"... and I pointed out that the typical American pattern had become: (first) "falling in love," (then) having sex, and (finally) getting married. Some people stopped at step two!

The Rabbi (in turn) said of our topic: "Love, Sex, and Marriage," that Torah affirms all three, **but not in that order!** In fact, Torah (Jewish Law) expects them to come in exactly the *reverse* order! First, you commit...

Jewish tradition includes "arranged marriage" (as you may know from "Fiddler on the Roof": the "matchmaker"). As in the case of Mary & Joseph, a betrothal -- a pledge of commitment -- is often made before either partner has any chance of getting to know the other. Within Judaism, it is after marriage, exclusively, that comes the sexual experiences... with the intention that **sexual intimacy would further solidify** their *commitment to* the marriage, and bring forth children in a stable home. "Love," said the Rabbi,

"was a later development, which arose from those shared experiences..."  
Love was born from the celebrations & struggles, and time spent together *living out the commitment* of their marriage. (There's food for thought! Sex after marriage?)

I tell you those stories, by way of introduction, to suggest that we may be "presuming" *we know what we mean by LOVE* while others in our society think differently. Times have changed; our society is highly sexualized. Kids don't want to wait even until they are dating! Middle school girls back East have been sending nude photos of themselves using cell-phone cameras and the internet! When asked, one said "It didn't mean anything; it's just sex."

Once (years ago), I was invited to speak at the Student Center at Dominguez Hills about "The ETHICS of Dating & Love Relationships." I told those Dominguez Hills students that LOVE need not necessarily involve sex at all, nor lead to plans of marriage... for the purpose of "dating" (during high school and college) may, in fact, be simply "to become better friends."

Man, oh, man...*did that date me!* I was old-fashioned even back then. Who even talks about "dating" anymore? Young folks just *hang out* or *hook up*. (*Nobody goes on "dates" anymore, Rev. Lance!*) But when I was younger, dating was **the process of getting acquainted -- "going out" together -- a time for mutual exploration** of different personality types, communication skills, one's sexuality, values and expectations, and setting boundaries. (Does anybody even talk about *setting boundaries* anymore?) The purpose of dating was: **to get acquainted, and to "explore"...** *Not to find a sexual partner* -- although that may have been one of the partners' desire! (It used to be *the boy* wanted to "score" but now it seems *both parties* are equally apt to make the first move.) In any case, I advised those students that they'd better be clear about their standards in advance (and be prepared with a variety of ways of saying "No!").

I suggested to those students that they may want to be clear in their own mind, as well as clear with their friend, as to what *purpose* they were spend-

ing their time together (and know, at least for oneself, what you expect from this exploration in intimacy). For them, love was *eros!* No philos, no agape.

In today's sermon, I cannot cover whole topic of "Love, Sex, and Marriage" so I'll deal only with LOVE.

In fact, I will narrow the discussion, for time's sake, to focus upon (what I would call) "a Christian Ethic of Love."

The word "Ethics" applies to the principles we hold by which we evaluate behavior. Ethics are broad guidelines that we abstract from careful observation & thought; principles which **we believe will enable people to function fully and effectively**. (One could say that our ethics are our "ideals.") ***ETHICAL BEHAVIOR** are those actions which assure that individual well-being will flourish, and that social "good" will be enhanced.*

"Morality" is defined by how our actions effect others. **Recognizing** that our actions do affect other people (which is the "moral dimension") -- and engaging in the process of **defining "ethical" guidelines** for those encounters -- are good for us to do, and healthy for society, whether one is Christian or not. You don't have to be Christian to have ethics.

And you don't have to be Christian to speak of love. The words "I love you" are common currency in the public domain! Christian ethics will *sometimes* match the values of society (values of "practicality," for example; or improving one's "material well-being"), but what distinguishes the Christian perspective is *our measuring of ourselves against Jesus' story & promises*.

For the Christian, neither social norms, nor ethnic traditions; not Torah-Law, nor even State-law is our primary concern. Our behavior is measured against the standard of *Jesus' own* ethics. Are we Christ-like in what we do?

As the founding figure of Christianity, the views held by Jesus and his followers, -- those men & women whose lives were changed & who were so deeply affected by his death -- is the measure of whether something is to be called "Christian" or not ("Christ-like" or not).

So, what -- specifically -- is a "**CHRISTIAN**" ETHIC of Love? When St. John writes: "Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God," what makes our understanding of LOVE different from the soap operas and the Sonnets of Shakespeare?

The test is simple enough: does our love reflect the values of Jesus of Nazareth -- as his life and teachings are recorded in the Gospels? To me, that is the primary measure of Christian Love: it will be "Christ-like" love. And Jesus, in turn, we believe, lived fully (& demonstrated perfectly) the kind of love that God intends... of which there are three noteworthy attributes:

First, it is non-judgmental. God's love is non-judgmental.

Jesus said, for example: "*My Father sends rain on the just and the unjust alike...*" Jesus says it is not enough to "love only those who love you" (to love only those **who are like** us), but that we are to "Love our enemies..." That kind of **non-judgmental, unconditional, freely given, God-initiated, steadfast love** is often called "GRACE" in the church. But it is LOVE: *AGAPE*

Second, God's Love -- Christian Love -- is self-correcting.

"*Forgive us, in the same way as we forgive others,*" Jesus taught his followers to pray. (Not just occasionally, but over-&-over: forgive 70-times-7 times!) His followers were often encouraged to "**Repent...**" (that is, to "turn around" and to "start over.") Jesus says we may "*go, and sin no more,*" and time & again he says: "*your faith has made you well...*" In other words, it seems to me, Christian Love *expects "change" to happen*; it encourages *self-correction*, development, growth... The inability to change is death.

God's love is non-judgmental... Self-correcting...

And, third, Christian Love, like God's Love, is "other-serving" -- even to the point of renouncing self, if needs be! Advocating on behalf of the *un-*

lovable. Giving of oneself. "Christ-like" love is *other*-centered; other-*serv*ing.

What's required of our ethics in order to say they are "Christian" is not a simple list of forbidden & approved behavior (rules of "do's and don't's"), but rather an approach that is **wholeheartedly open toward God: an attitude toward God** that engages our whole mind, our whole body, and all our being! (*Love the Lord your God with all your heart... soul... mind... strength!*)

And then, from that source, we are to wholeheartedly love our neighbor as we love ourselves. (You'll recognize that, of course, as "the Great Commandment" that Jesus taught.)

Similarly, "the Golden Rule" shows our ethical approach: **we will do unto others that which we would appreciate them doing for us**. It's not enough for us to refrain from doing harm. No, to be Christian ("Christ-like") **we must promote others' welfare**. The Christian is *commanded* to love!

Now, those "others" may not respect us; *they may not thank us*; they may not respond to our kindness... They may even want to take advantage of us (since they know we are "supposed to be" doing our best to love them)! Well, that's their problem. (And I'll admit: it's sometimes hard to live **with moral sensitivity in an a-moral world**; sometimes our "ethics" may be liabilities!) Christian love *demand*s much from us. It's not natural, nor easy.

As you can see, "Christ-like" love is not very sentimental, nor romantic; and it's certainly not for the lazy! The love of God which we freely receive **challenges us to move in a positive, life-giving direction** (to reconcile).

It's not enough just to love *our "innermost circle,"* where our social obligations & sense of moral responsibility is strongest (such as our family). Nor just loving *the next wider circle* of "friends" (who are people, most often, who are "like us" and whom WE LIKE). Nor is it enough for our love to include those further-distant circles of *co-workers, acquaintances, and*

*strangers*. Our call to LOVE stretches even so far as to the circles we have defined as our "enemies." We are to love! **That** is the Christian mandate.

*“Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God...*

*Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love.”* (I John 4:7-8)

This central ethical principle of Jesus -- **this imperative to LOVE** -- strikes us as *extreme*. *It is radical!* It doesn't allow us to set up any easy checklist of "good/bad" (nor of "us/them"), and we cannot "absolutize" any of the circles of relative responsibility as our self-selected "target audience" for bestowing our love.

Love, as demonstrated by Christ and his followers, will (1) enable people to function fully and effectively (as God would desire). It will (2) inspire people to better themselves, and (3) it will show *respect*, mutuality, and justice toward others. To do less is not love.

So, if someone says they "love you," but the relationship they mean by that word does not serve those ends, they are speaking of something other than a Christian ethic of love.

I would sum it up by saying that we show a person *love* when we "get RADICAL in showing them **RESPECT**"...realizing that *the person they are* (male, female, boyfriend, girlfriend, gay/straight, transgendered) is a Child of God. Loved by God! *Precious*. Made in the image of God, and *of equal worth as oneself*.

A Christian ethic of LOVE is (1) non-judgmental, (2) self-correcting, and (3) other-serving... It's a love that stands out from the "norm" by being more patient and forgiving than most; neither jealous, nor boastful; rarely resentful, delighting in open communication... All those things that St. Paul wrote about in First Corinthians 13 (which will be a sermon for another time). To my way of thinking, acts of love are the only things of *eternal* value. So, let us learn it, and *live* it. For "they will know we are Christian by our *love!*"

Amen.