

Love One Another as I Have Loved You

A Sermon by *the Rev. Dr. Joseph David Stinson*,
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The second sermon in the Lenten sermon series on Love.

Text: John 13:34 “As I have loved you, so you must love one another.” ~Jesus

Last week Ms Reynolds preached on the two great commandments of Jesus: that we must love God with all our heart, soul, mind and strength and our neighbors as ourselves. Now today’s text comes from the Gospel of John and follows the last supper. Jesus said, “*As I have loved you, so you must love one another.*” Now the only people in the room when Jesus said these words were disciples, so this command is explicitly addressed to disciples, to church members. We must love one another as he loved each of us. This is a no-brainer, something we take for granted and probably presume to be true without much thought. But I remind you, internal fights are characteristic of churches, almost always present, and have been since the time of Acts. Our own church is not exempt from friction. Indeed, in the last few years, there has been a full measure of it. After one of these family spats it is not always easy to love one another again. In fact the closer we are in families and churches, the more difficult forgiveness and love can be in the aftermath of a fight. So let us not assume it is easy to love one another. It isn’t. It takes grace and lots of care. If your experience like mine, it is almost always easier to love people in general than it is to love those we know personally.

Moreover, the challenge of this dominical commandment, to love one another as Jesus loved, is nigh unattainable. Tom Holladay in the book many of us are reading wrote that recognizing just how difficult Jesus’ love is the best, first step.¹ The impossibility forces us to our knees to seek power outside ourselves to love others. We need help to love the way he loved us. Of course, most of us do not adopt the Jesus’ standard. We look down the pew at that other person we know and say, *I’m better than she is at love.* But compare yourself to Jesus—there is a challenge for you! If honest, we know the impossibility of the commandment to love one another this way. To attempt it means we must find power beyond ourselves to achieve anything close to this level of his love. We will only find this level of love in the Holy Spirit and will have to make room for the Spirit in our lives if we are going to love like Jesus.

Jesus command is not to *feel* love toward everyone—in this case every church member—but rather to *act* lovingly toward everyone in church.² In time if you act in love, it will eventually change your feelings. Do not hold back waiting till you feel like loving. If you do, you will never love that difficult person who is three pews away from you this morning, or the person who is not here this morning because he was afraid he would see you in church and get high blood pressure. The example of acting lovingly

¹ Holladay, Tom. The Relationship Principles of Jesus. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2008), 83.

² *Ibid.*, 90.

before feeling that way is Jesus himself.³ Remember the night before his cross, did he feel like dying? No, he prayed in Gethsemane, “if possible take this cup from me.” He wanted to escape the cross, if possible. But after praying and wrestling with faith and feelings, obligation and love, he said to the Father, “Nevertheless, not my will but yours be done.”⁴ It is what Holladay calls *nevertheless* love,⁵ the kind of love that can only come from God. Hence, my advice to you: if you want to love as Christ loved, you must seek the Spirit’s power. Such love will never be accomplished by human effort, even Herculean effort, but only by God’s love entering your heart and your soul and mind.

The Gethsemane story brings me to my second point, to love like this requires prayer. You may remember the character Bob Harrington, the self-styled *Chaplain of Bourbon Street* in New Orleans. A Baptist preacher, he worked in the sinful French Quarter, ministering to, listening to, trying to help drunks, prostitutes, gamblers, addicts and the forgotten people. I once read a book by him. Long lost, I don’t even remember the title, but I still remember one piece of his advice. “*Pray for your enemies. It may do nothing for them but it will do wonders for your attitude!*” Some of our enemies—regrettably—are in church sitting in a nearby pew. Not that they are enemies like Osama Bin Laden, but personal animosity and human interaction being what they are, sometimes we think of folks that way. Jesus demanded we love our enemies and pray for them.

Jesus can take what little love we have to give and work with it.⁶ He also works in the heart and life of the one we try to love and prepares them to receive love. Not all such people are our enemies; some are just cranky and unlovable. But Christ’s Spirit works miracles by motivating us to try and by preparing receptivity in those we seek to love. I have often dreaded conversations and meetings with such people—yes, at times people in church—and I have feared such encounters so much that I have prayed before meeting them. I pray for patience and help from God to say the right things and to keep my animosity in check. And you know what? Often I find a different reception than I expected. Perhaps the change is in me, but the person seems somehow readied for a different relationship, conversation, too. Is it an accident? Or an infusion of grace?

I told you before we began *Forty Days of Love* that I heard Rick Warren at Ocean Grove in September, speaking about this program. He described Holladay’s book, the sermons by ministers on love during Lent, and the small group discussions. Early in his presentation, he spoke about the dream of having 500 to 600 congregations in the New York Metro area studying, praying, working on love during these weeks.⁷ He had great confidence that it would have positive impact upon our culture. We have become so accustomed to talking about tolerating different people in our society! Warren wondered aloud if toleration was enough? Might we not make love our aim instead, and if so, what would happen to the level of civil interaction and discourse in New Jersey and New York and Long Island? But then he paused and asked us if any of us knew anyone in our

³ *Ibid.*, 91.

⁴ Luke 22:42.

⁵ Holladay, *op cit*, 91.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 93.

⁷ The best guess is that we have over 200 churches in the New York area in this program now.

churches difficult to love? Is there someone who is always cranky at committee meetings, unhappy when you grasp their hands on Sunday and wish for them the peace of Christ, or someone always gossiping about other members, seemingly hoping for the worst? “Do you think those people can’t be loved? Can’t learn a new level of loving discipleship?” Warren asked. He asserted that a more loving style of Christianity can be cultivated and will make a huge difference in the spiritual vitality of our churches. It is not just our wider culture that needs our help. Our churches also need help. Point of fact, *we* need help. Loving is the way, the means, the hallmark of a spiritually charged Christianity. All of us want to believe this but even if we do not know for sure, I bet most of us would like to experiment and see if it is so. I challenge you to start by loving one other person—even if it is only for forty days, give it a try. After all, we know we are supposed to try this out during Lent: the preachers are preaching on it, the choir and congregation are singing *Ubi Caritas* every Sunday, and lots of us are even reading books and discussing becoming better lovers. Maybe that cranky, love-starved person in a nearby pew you are thinking about will even forgive you for being kind and caring. After all, after Easter, he and you can go back to being at odds when this love fest ends! What do you have to lose?

Holladay advises in the book five practical steps to improving our practice of love, right out of 1Corinthians 13.⁸ Let’s consider them and then try them at coffee hour today and then during the week ahead:

1. Be patient, because love is patient.⁹
2. Be kind, because love is kind.¹⁰
3. Don’t be proud, because love does not envy, is not boastful or arrogant.¹¹
4. Don’t be selfish, because love does not insist on its own way, is not easily angered and keeps no record of wrong.¹²
5. And don’t give up, because love always perseveres, endures and hopes all things, and never ends.¹³

Let me leave you with two questions to ponder during our prayers this morning: How may I find power from Jesus to love and forgive the impossible person I have been thinking about during this sermon? And, how and to whom may I express love this week through more patience, kindness, humility, unselfishness and perseverance?

End.

To Love One Another as I Have Loved You. DOC

⁸ Holladay, *op cit*, 128-132.

⁹ 1Corinthians 13:4.

¹⁰ 1Corinthians 13:4.

¹¹ 1Corinthians 13:4.

¹² 1Corinthians 13:5.

¹³ 1Corinthians 13:7-8.