

[1] And the greatest of these is love

St. John's Presbyterian, Mt. Roskill

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Readings: Psalm 103, John 15:9-17, 1 Corinthians 13, Romans 13:8-10

Other than the Lord, who have you loved the most in your life? How does that love express itself? Who has loved you the most? How has that felt? How have you known? We have already spoken this month of two of great aspects of the Christian walk, hope and faith, and today we turn to the greatest, love.

[2] We love because God first loved us, says, 1 John 4:19. John has just previously explained in his epistle that God is love (v16) and that whoever lives in love lives in God. He continues, pointing out that whoever hates his brother or sister lies about their faith because to walk in the way of Jesus requires us to love our brother and sister. This then is the great Christian challenge for us ... to be, as John says, to be, in this world, like Jesus.

We should address a common misconception before we continue here. God is love but love is not God. One of the common fallacies, even heresies, is that anything is acceptable if it is loving or based in love. To walk God's way in love requires a combination of love and holiness. That is to walk in a way of love, to live a definition of love, we have to consider that character and nature of God. That we have to do this suggests that love can be corrupted and sadly this is true to an extent. Love itself cannot be corrupt but what people understand to be love can be. Take for example the parent who mercilessly beats their child "for their own good" or the husband that abuses his wife "so that she might know her place". These are not loving acts. They are about power and control and the perpetrator's own weakness and sin. Love is not solely an emotion, although emotion is a vital and very human part of love. Instead, true love reflects the very character and holiness of God. For the Christian we know what love is by considering God as revealed to us most particularly in Jesus. If you like, Jesus was walking love amongst us.

Love is one of the Christian virtues. What are virtues? They are characteristics that make us fit to live in the Kingdom of God. Amongst these love is primary. It is the practical manifestation of all God wants us to be. To be living in love is to walk as Jesus did. Virtues are not just characteristics that demand we behave correctly, they go much deeper than that. Virtues reflect the philosophy of life that we embody and embrace. They reflect who we are and who we are becoming. They encompass our desires, our emotions, our thought processes, our societal and deliberative skills, our abilities and talents and who we are at the most fundamental levels. Because love, as a Christian virtue, is based in the nature and character of God lived through us, this love will, in many instances, likely be different to the love seen in the world.

Turning to our text from John 15 we see that Jesus, in teaching His disciples, linked love with obedience to His command. Because Jesus had loved His Father and been obedient to Him, Jesus had remained in His Father's love. So too Jesus tells us to be obedient to His command so that we stay in His love. Jesus told His disciples that He modelled love as they should love it. Verse 13 gives us one of the

greatest ever statements on love in all of human history. Jesus said, **“Greater love has no one than this, that he lay down his life for his friends.”** Jesus was not talking about His death here specifically, although we recognise His death as the absolute sacrificial demonstration of love, rather Jesus was speaking about how we live. We love by making daily, hourly, minutely smaller and greater sacrifices for others. This is living love. When you wake up and pray for your family and friends, for God’s will to be lived in your life today you are acting in love. When you give up your time to call and encourage a friend or relative, to cheer a lonely person, to give your time to serve in some capacity, you are loving. When you do your duties around the house, at work, when you serve God at church and in the community, willingly, pro-actively, positively and faithfully you act lovingly. To love is to lay down your life each day in what you do for others. In loving this way says Jesus, we bear fruit for the Kingdom of God. That phone call you make to an elderly relative, that hug you give to someone you know is lonely, that small gift you anonymously drop off, that task you help with, all of these are love in action. Each impacts another and bears fruit for the kingdom. And this is what we were chosen for says Jesus.

Love of course impacts our character. We all know, or should know, 1 Corinthians 13 quite well. It’s a chapter that has caught something of the human dream, or at least it seems to have by the number of times it is used as weddings. It speaks of the character of love as it lists how it acts. It’s a good self-test to put your name in place of the word love ... try it for a moment ... as I read out the text substitute your name in each time I say ‘love’. Here we go ... **“Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. Love does not dishonour others, love is not self-seeking, love is not easily angered, love keeps no record of wrongs. Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. Love always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres. Love never fails.”** How did you go? The apostle Paul wrote this to the Corinthians in the context of them having Communion services that were becoming drunken parties that exemplified the worst of the social and class structures of their society and the religious ineptitude of false priests and prophets. The people had forgotten that the love of God breaks down all social, ethnic and economic barriers. That the love of God looks out for those who are worse off than we are and is giving rather than taking. It does not look out for self first but is concerned for those who are on the margins. In contrast to our self-centred, entitled culture of today this gospel is starkly challenging. It is love that will survive through all the greatness and weakness of human life and endeavour but sadly not all will appreciate it. It is living in love and by love that draws us into the very heart of God. It is acting with love that helps us to become more and more like Jesus.

The apostle Paul tells us that as the Day of the Lord approaches we should let no debt remain outstanding except the debt to love. That in loving our fellow man and woman we have fulfilled the Law.

How then should we love? The Greek language is far more explicit about love than English. Like the indigenous Greenland Indians have some two hundred words to describe snow, and we have one, the Greeks had four primary words to describe

love – *eros*, *storge*, *philos* and *agape*. *Eros* love refers to passionate, romantic and sexual love. This love is the primary model exemplified on so much of our media and of all forms of love is the one that is the most primal, self-seeking and needy. *Storge* is a familial love, the natural love between parents and children and between siblings in loving households. *Philos* is the love that grows in close friendships. The sort of love seen between David and Jonathan in the Old Testament. And finally, *Agape* is the selfless, giving love that is typified by Jesus and that ultimately comes from God.

When Jesus rose from the dead and met the repentant Peter on the beach (John 21) Jesus asked Peter three times if Peter loved him. The first time he asked if Peter loved him with *agape* love, with the love that comes from God, more than he loved those around him. Given his earlier protestations to that effect prior to his denial this was a telling question. Peter replied that Jesus knew he loved him this way. The second time Jesus asked Peter again if Peter loved Him with the love of God and Peter upset to be asked again confirmed it with the term for *philos* love indicating that he loved Jesus as the very closest of friends. The third time Jesus asked him, “do you love me?” using the term *philos* Peter had just used. It was like saying ‘do you really love me that closely?’ Peter felt hurt that Jesus questioned him but responded that yes, he loved him with *philos* love as the closest of friends. Each time Jesus told Peter to feed His sheep. In others, words Peter had spoken love before He betrayed Jesus but he had not lived it – either as the love given from God or as love towards a close friend. Jesus now challenged Peter to live the love he professed – both the love that comes from God and the love of close friendship. Put simply, get on with the work of loving. This is what we are called to today – to live out love through our actions so that the world might see a demonstration of the love of God in action through us. Like Peter we can profess love but nothing in what we do demonstrates it, so what sort of love is that? We truly love when we live it. As Paul observed, all the commandments, the Ten Commandments and all the rest, are summed up in one rule: “Love your neighbour as yourself.”

So, to conclude, our job description is a simple one: go out and be truly good lovers.

Amen!