



Sermon, August 14, 2016
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Coburg and Junction City United Methodist Churches

Sermon Series: Come Meet Jesus
“Bearing the Fruit in which Love Abides”

Scripture: John 15:1-17

‘I am the true vine, and my Father is the vine-grower. He removes every branch in me that bears no fruit. Every branch that bears fruit he prunes to make it bear more fruit. You have already been cleansed by the word that I have spoken to you. 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. I am the vine, you are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing. Whoever does not abide in me is thrown away like a branch and withers; such branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned. If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask for whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. My Father is glorified by this, that you bear much fruit and become my disciples. As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love. 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. I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete.

‘This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. No one has greater love than this, to lay down one’s life for one’s friends. You are my friends if you do what I command you. 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. You 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. I am giving you these commands so that you may love one another.

St. Jerome, in his commentary on Chapter 6 of the Epistle to the Galatians (Jerome, *Comm. in ep. ad. Gal.*, 6, 10), tells the well-loved story that John the Evangelist continued preaching in Ephesus even when he was in his 90s. The evangelist was so enfeebled with old age that the people had to carry him into the Church in Ephesus on a stretcher. And when he was no longer able to preach or deliver a long discourse, his custom was to lean up on one elbow on every occasion and say simply: “Little children, love one another.” This continued on, even when the ageing John was on his death-bed.

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Then he would lie back down and his friends would carry him back out. Every week, the same thing happened, again and again. And every week it was the same short sermon, exactly the same message: “Little children, love one another.” One day, the story goes, someone asked him about it: “John, why is it that every week you say exactly the same thing, ‘little children, love one another’?” And John replied: “Because it is enough.”

This same St. John is responsible according to Church tradition for the Gospel that bears his name. It is in this Gospel that we find today’s scripture reading. Christ is assembled with his disciples in the upper room on the night before Passover in order to celebrate the feast with them. His heart is heavy, but he wishes to imbue them with the fullness of his mission, and to encourage them as fully as possible to go forward with his mission after his death – a death of which only he is fully aware. He washes their feet, and choreographs everything in the meal to embody the agape love he has come to show to the world.

“Abide in me... Love one another.” Two commandments based on one universal reality: God is love. Paul says in Colossians that in Christ all things hold together (τὰ πάντα ἐν αὐτῷ συνέστηκεν). [hold together, cohere, endure, exist – in essence, all things owe their existence and coherence to Christ.] If Christ is a flesh and blood revelation of God, then Christ is revealing the power and pervasiveness of love. Which is why John says, in effect, “if you get this right, if you can do this, you have done it all. There is nothing more to do.”

Love was not an option for Jesus. Love was at the core of who he was and what he did. If Jesus, as the Incarnation of the 2nd person of the Trinity, is that force that holds the universe together, and if God, i.e., the Trinitarian God, is Love, as John says in his first letter, then it is reasonable to say that it is Love that holds the universe together.

Now, this isn’t an original idea. In fact, in the 5th Century BCE, a Greek Philosopher by the name of Empedocles proposed that two primary forces were at work in the universe: love and strife. He proposed that the universe was composed of four elements, fire, earth, air and water, and

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Love and Strife acted as forces to bring about the mixture and separation of the elements. Love brought things together and held them together, and strife separated things out from one another. So in many ways, Paul is building on an earlier idea, but he is claiming now that this Universal force of Love was none other than the one we knew on earth as Jesus Christ.

Yes, Jesus was all about love. Not a sappy, sentimental, gushy mushy kind of love. His love was the kind that made a person willing to lay down their life for their friends. It’s the kind of love that you cannot dismiss. It is the kind of love that makes us as human beings, and in its absence, breaks us.

In fact, contemporary neuroscience is revealing that we are made for and by love. We are actually made to connect with each other. The image Jesus uses of being part of a vast interconnected vine dramatizes this fact. If you look at the human brain under a microscope, what you see is a massive vine-like tangle of neurons connecting with each other. All our thoughts, all our sense impressions – what we see, hear, taste, touch and feel – all these things travel around this vast neural jungle. Neuroscientists have found something very interesting about this tangled bramble of neurons: Anytime we receive a sense impression from outside, it is first routed through the part of the brain called the limbic system, where it receives an emotional tag. It is this emotional life and ability to make deep emotional connections with one another and with places and situations that characterizes human relationships, family life, social structures and broader human communities. It also characterizes our embeddedness in the natural world.

Several years ago, I read a book entitled *A General Theory of Love*, written by three psychiatrists at UCSF Medical School. In that book the authors explain how “...our nervous systems are not self-contained: from earliest childhood our brains actually link with those of the people close to us in silent rhythm that makes up the life force of the body. These wordless ties determine our mood, stabilize and maintain our health, and change the structure of our brains, so that, in a very real sense, who we

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are and who we become depend on whom we love.” And, more to the point, how we love.

The practice and power of love is central to the message and life of Jesus Christ. In fact, John makes the radical claim that the path to knowing God is followed by loving one another: “Whoever does not love does not know God, because God is love.”

But there is a flipside to this. And that is the fact that we need to be careful about the sorts of attachments we make, and how we care for our attachments. Because we are designed to make attachments, our heart doesn't care to whom we are attached. Which is how we can get into bad friendships and bad relationships. It also is how good people can do bad things in the company of other people. We will seek to preserve the relationship rather than challenge the activity. Those of you who have either read the Harry Potter books or seen the movies might recall Neville Longbottom standing up to Harry, Hermione and Ron in the first Harry Potter movie when the three friends decide to go into the basement of Hogwarts in search of the Philosopher's Stone. At the end of the movie, Albus Dumbledore awards Neville 10 points for that courageous act, simply because the hardest thing to do in life is to stand up to our friends if they are doing something that is wrong. Therefore, tending the heart requires that we be careful as to with whom our hearts come in contact.

So it is that as we tend to our hearts, we need to know how our hearts work – that we are made to be connected together, and that this is possible because we are also made in the image of the One in whom all things hang together. Life buffets and us and tosses around, bruises and wounds us in many ways. How will we respond? St. John said, “Little children, love one another.” Love one another because Jesus, in whom the whole universe hangs together by love, said to love one another. We either hang together, or we all fall apart. It is our choice.

“John, why is it that every week you say exactly the same thing, ‘little children, love one another’?”

“Because it is enough.”