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To Belong is To Be Loved

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I John 4:7-21

Someone texted me earlier this week and asked what I was preaching on this Sunday. I was tempted to reply, “What would you like to hear about? What topic would draw you to church?”

Instead, my reply was one word: love.

“Well, that’s as good as it gets,” they texted back. “I better show up.”

That’s a perfect way to describe our role as followers of Jesus: when it comes to love, we show up.

Our culture tends to treat love as a noun and cloak it in sentimentality, as if it were merely a private feeling. Our faith, instead, treats love as a verb and understands it as an action we are called to do...Love heals. Love hopes. Love forgives. Love advocates. Love serves. Love listens. Love speaks up. Loves feeds and clothes and visits and grieves and gives and prays.

Love shows up.

And love is not only a private matter. Loving, in the way of Jesus, is also practiced in public. For those who haven't been downtown to Westminster since pre-Covid days, our church still has the sign up along 12th St. that quotes Cornel West in large letters: Justice is what love looks like in public.

So, yes, today we're talking about love, but that could probably be said of most any sermon ever preached. Love is the bottom line for Christians. It's our guiding star, our path through the world, our alpha and omega, the measure of all our actions.

Our reformed, Presbyterian, tradition speaks of "the rule of love" in assessing any interpretation of scripture. We are not biblical literalists. Anyone who says they take scripture literally is simply saying they have decided their interpretation is the only way to understand a particular text.

Another way of reading the Bible always puts any conclusion we reach about a passage of scripture to this test: Does it reflect the love of God? If not, the interpretation is a distortion of biblical intent.

Applying the rule of love to the Bible has been the catalyst for change in the church's view of any number of social and ecclesiastical issues...

We used scripture to justify the enslavement of people long ago, but does that reflect the love of God?

We used the Bible to refuse to recognize the leadership of women in the Church, but does that reflect the love of God?

We excused discrimination against LGBTQ persons based on certain texts in scripture, but does that reflect the love of God?

In each of those instances, people wielded the Bible to support conclusions that did not pass the test of the rule of love, and eventually the church – speaking here of the Presbyterian Church – eventually the church saw the need to change.

To state the obvious, the rule of love applies not only to scripture. It is the singular measure of how we, you and I, live. Where the world might want to gauge how well we are living by how much power or money we have, or what position and privilege we have gained, or how successful we are in getting our way, or whether we are “inning” against those we consider “opponents,” the rule of love, for those who show up to follow Jesus, looks at things from a different point of view...

Do our words reflect the love of God?

Does the use of our resources and time reflect the love of God?

Does the way we interact with family and friends, with co-workers and strangers reflect the love of God?

Does our response to social realities that we know need to change reflect the love of God?

Living by the standard of love makes a difference. Love changes us, and it can transform the world.

The fourth chapter of the first letter of John makes it sound simple: "God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them."

I have quoted that line from I John at the start of every wedding I've done for the last 35 years. Anyone is listening might think the words are describing the love of the couple, but the words convey much more than that. They're saying that when we show up to love - whether in a relationship with a partner, or with family, or with friends and even with strangers - when we show up to love we are on holy ground. We are in the presence of God. When we love, we are living with, abiding with, God.

In case we miss the point, I John also says it in the negative: Whoever does not love does not know God.

Love is the doorway to God, the sine qua non, the essential thing without which there is no thing.

I John is so bold as to assert, “No one has ever seen God; if we love one another, God lives in us, and God’s love is perfected in us.”

When I find myself in a conversation with someone who challenges me to convince them of the reality of God and the truth of the claims of faith we make as followers of Jesus, I turn to this text. No one has ever been talked into religious conviction, or as I John says, no one has ever seen God, but everyone either knows love or thirsts for love, or aspires to be loved, in their lives.

That is as close to God as we will come – to know that our longing to be affirmed as human beings just as we are, that our desire to be accepted fully and with equity in community, that our aching to belong to something larger than ourselves, that our yearning to be loved, all are expressions of our hunger for God.

And when those longings are satisfied – when we are accepted and valued for who we are, when we are welcomed fully into community, when we are loved – we have encountered God, the one who lives in us, and whose love is perfected in us.

That opening line in weddings is not merely about the love of the couple. God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them. That text is a window onto something much grander and far more profound: To abide in love is to belong to God, and to belong to God is be loved by God.

Next week we will receive some two-dozen people into the life of Westminster. At the new member class last Sunday, we went around the room – and the zoom – to share our stories. People spoke about how they came to Westminster and why they had made the decision to become part of this particular company of disciples. As we listened, three themes emerged.

First, it was an ecumenical and interfaith, group, which is common. There's no set path into most churches these days. Denominational loyalty is not as important as it once was, and we can accept that. People may have grown up in or sampled one stream of Christianity or another, they may have embraced other traditions, or may have had no religion at all in their journey of faith. New people are drawn in when they sense the active presence and love of God, and by what they hear in our worship and music and what they see in how we practice our faith.

Second, people said they became interested in Westminster because of our involvement in seeking justice and serving others and working for change. People find

the public expression of God's love in action compelling and want to be part of the good work of making the world a better place.

Finally, people in the class kept saying that because of the isolation of Covid, they had a deeper longing for community – and not just any group, but a community whose faith and values reflect the love of God. As we went around the room people said that the pandemic had caused for them – and perhaps for many of us – a reassessment of the essentials in life. We should not lose touch with that reassessment of the essentials of life. The new members wanted to belong to a community trying its best to pursue the essentials: loving in the way of Jesus. They were seeking beloved community.

One of the new members came up to me after the class and said, “This year's focus on belonging at Westminster is just what I needed.”

They could have been quoting I John: “Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God; everyone who loves is born of God and knows God.”

There's a lot of anxiety in the broader church these days about what Covid has done to traditional notions of church membership and attendance and involvement. It's a popular topic among my colleagues and in the media. Yesterday the Wall Street Journal had an article describing

how the pandemic has accelerated a downward trend in American churches. We keep hearing this over and over again.

Last week, listening to our new members suggests that when the love of God is lived and shared in ways that are authentic, people show up – maybe not how they would have 10 or 30 or 50 years ago, but they still yearn to belong to a community that gives them meaning and purpose in life.

The future of the church will depend upon its capacity to love in the way God calls us to love. It will also depend on our willingness to make God's love a verb.

We do that in many ways at Westminster – in our work to care for creation, in our building affordable housing, our pursuit of racial justice, our music and art, our nurture of children and care for seniors and work for change, and all of this is love in action.

In a moment, when we baptize new member Andrea Hyde and little Jacob Robert and Martin James, that, too, will be love in action, as we welcome them into the church.

Love keeps showing up.

Next week is Stewardship Sunday, and we hope love shows up again on that day, in the form of a pledge to support the ministry and mission of Westminster in 2022 – not simply because we have a budget to fund, but primarily because it’s a concrete way we show the love of God.

The beloved community is a giving community. Being generous is one way to make love a verb. And as has been said many times from this pulpit over the years, the church is not in the business of protecting anyone from their own generosity.

On the contrary, as I John reminds us, “Beloved, since God loved us so much, we also ought to love one another.”

May it be so.

Thanks be to God.

Amen.