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“What Love Looks Like”

1 John 4:7-12
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I like having Valentines Day fall on a Sunday, because the holiday itself has origins in the Christian faith. Over the years Valentines Day has evolved into a day to honor romantic love, which of course means different things to different people. Listen to how children view romantic love. “No one is sure why love happens, but I heard it has something to do with how you smell. That’s why perfume and deodorant are so popular.” A little boy said, “I think you get shot with an arrow or something, but the rest of it isn’t nearly as painful.” Explaining why people in love hold hands, one 8 year old said, “They hold hands so their rings don’t fall off, because they paid good money for them.” And here is how you can tell if 2 people eating at a restaurant are in love, “People in love just stare at each other until their food gets cold. Normal people care much more about the food.”

Today is a day when we celebrate love in all its various dimensions from the heartbreaking to the delightful, the deep to the mundane. Of course, love has been trivialized almost to the point of meaninglessness, used by advertisers to help us lose weight and sell toothpaste and beer. It has been sentimentalized and sanitized, packaged and processed. But genuine love is altogether different, it is costly and challenging. The poet Rilke wrote, “For one human being to love another; that is perhaps the most difficult of all our tasks, the ultimate, the last test and proof, the work for which all other work is but preparation.” Love is difficult, symbolized NOT just by Cupid in diapers, but Jesus Christ on the cross.

This coming week we begin the season of Lent. Lent is the time when we reflect upon the love of Jesus Christ for us, a love that lays down its life. A love that serves, suffers and dies, and then triumphs over death. When we look at Jesus, we see a love that is costly indeed.

In the year 496 Pope Gelasius tried to bring a spiritual dimension to a pagan Roman Feast Day. He wanted to honor several early Christian Martyrs named Valentine. The first Valentine was a priest who was executed on February 14, 269. His crime was a refusal to obey the Roman emperor, who considered all Christians illegal citizens and guilty of treason. He told them that if they would denounce Christ and

proclaim Caesar as Lord, their lives would be spared. But Valentine, refused, and for that refusal he literally lost his head. He was decapitated for his refusal to deny Christ. While in jail awaiting death, he reportedly wrote some love letters to his girlfriend. They were poetic and passionate letters expressing his undying love for her, and he signed them, “your Valentine.”

Just 3 years later, another Valentine tried to convert people to Christianity. When a prominent Roman family converted, this Valentine also lost his head. Over 200 years after their deaths, Pope Gelasius believed that these men should be canonized for making the ultimate sacrifice for their faith, and St. Valentines Day was born. Somewhere along the way the Christian origins of this Holiday were lost and it became a tribute to romantic love. Now there is nothing wrong with romantic love, in fact it is a wonderful gift from God, but there are other expressions of love which do not receive nearly as much attention.

In his book The Four Loves, C.S. Lewis describes these different manifestations of love. First, according to Lewis, is affection. That is the general good feeling we have for most people and animals—at least most animals. Second, is friendship. Lewis describes this form of love as loyalty that endures over time, through good times and bad. Third, is Eros, the romantic notion of being “in love” that wonderful experience we celebrate on Valentines Day. And fourth is the deepest, most profound sort of love, known as agape or charity. It is the highest form of love, divinely inspired and it is a gift. Paul uses this term for love in his first letter to the Corinthians, writing about a love that bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, and endures all things. This was not the most common Greek word for love, but Paul used agape in this context to emphasize that such love is an act of will, far more than a feeling of the heart.

Lewis writes, “Love anything and your heart will be wrung and possibly broken. If you want to make sure of keeping it intact, you must give your heart to no one. Wrap it up with little luxuries, avoid all entanglements, and lock it in the casket of your selfishness. But there it will change. It will not be broken; it will become unbreakable, impenetrable, and irredeemable. The only place safe from the dangers of love is Hell.” Love in any form is not easy. It will break your heart

again and again. But it is the closest we will ever come to God this side of heaven.

I am so touched by couples who have been married a long, long time, and we have many in this church. People who have been married 50, 60 years, those are the ones who should be teaching us about love, people who have struggled and survived and not given up when it was very tempting to give up. Wrote James Thurber: “My pet antipathy is the bright detergent voice of the average singer, crooning shallow songs about love. We imagine love as an instant cure for discontent and a sure road to happiness. We look at marriage as some sort of tranquilizing drug. A woman 60 years old who has been married for 40 years and has 5 children really understands what love is. Love is what you have been through with somebody.”

What does love look like to you? Here are just a few snapshots of what love look like to me. Love looks like the woman described by Paul Miller in his book, *Love Walked among Us*. He writes, “She is late getting off work, so she calls home and asks her husband to please start the laundry, because their son needs his soccer uniform for a game at 7:00. She asks her son to make sure he does his homework because of the game later that night, and asks her daughter to take the casserole out of the freezer and put it in the oven. When she walks in the door 45 minutes later, her husband is reading the paper in front of the TV, and the laundry basket is still sitting there. Her son is playing a game on the computer, not doing his homework, his book bag still by the front door. And her daughter is talking on her cell phone as the casserole still sits in the freezer. Nobody looks up or even says “Hello” when she walks in. She wants to scream, or at least run away forever. But she doesn’t. Instead she starts the laundry, prepares dinner, and helps her son with his homework.” That’s what love looks like.

Love looks like Tom Stover. When I served a church in Colorado Springs I got a letter in the mail from Tom, with bold letters at the top which said: “Two Guys Need One Girl.” It said: “A little boy 3 and a half, and a dad who’s ten times that, live alone not far away in the valley of the Platte.” Tom was seeking a single Christian woman he could meet, because there were mighty slim pickins’ in Gering, Nebraska. He was lonely and this was in the days before E Harmony and Match.com,

so he sent this letter to several United Methodist Churches, hoping a single Christian woman would like to bring 2 guys into her life. I hope he found the love he was looking for.

Nearly every year around Valentines Day I think about Jennifer Moore. She was 15 months old when I officiated at her funeral and watched her tiny little casket lowered into the frozen ground...on Valentines Day. Can you imagine burying your only child on this Holiday, a day devoted to love? But as is so often the case, throughout her illness and death, Jennifer's parents were an inspiration to everyone. Even with broken hearts they believed that it was better to have had her and lost her, than never to have had her at all. They believed that this little baby girl who lived such a short time, made them better people, and they would not trade that experience of loving her. So now, 23 years and three children later, this family continues to show me what love looks like.

Love also looks like Sheila. Divorced at age 35 with 2 kids and no education, she was determined to hold it together for her children. She lost her home, moved into a small apartment and worked 2 jobs to support her family. But, and this is the remarkable thing, she still makes the time to volunteer at a Soup Kitchen on the weekends. She said, "I want my children to know that there are people much worse off than we were, and that we are morally obligated to help them."

And to my eyes, love looks like the Lakewood United Methodist Church. I see love in action every day in the people who park their cars right outside my office window to pick up the meals that they deliver to shut ins 5 days a week. Some of these folks delivering Meals on Wheels really look like they should be receiving those meals! I see love on Sunday mornings from those of you who do not take the best, closest parking spots, but you park your cars at the parking lot across the street at 14th and Brentwood, or at the very back of our parking lot, leaving the closest spaces for the elderly, disabled or our visitors.

I see it when April Nichols pulls up to pick up the food and clothes that she takes to the Jeffco Action Center every single week. I see it in Gary Dyer who after nearly 30 years of working with youth in this church still has some of his marbles. I see it in the many volunteers who worked this past week at Wheat Ridge United Methodist Church in our

Interfaith Hospitality Rotation helping just one homeless family, 2 parents with 3 adorable kids. I see it in the people who have decided to go on our very first Mission Trip of 2010. They are leaving Saturday for the Lydia Patterson Institute in El Paso, Texas where they will work for a week, and we need to keep them in our prayers. I see it in those who host Coffee every Sunday, who shovel snow and rake leaves and fix things and teach our children and serve on committees. To me, love looks like the Lakewood United Methodist Church.

So what does love look like to you? Where do you see evidence of a love that hopes, bears, endures and believes all things? The author of the three letters written by John in the New Testament was most likely the same person who wrote the Gospel of John, because these three letters closely resemble that Gospel in vocabulary, style and theology. The first letter of John is a beautiful treatise revealing how God's love is manifested. He goes so far as to say something very unusual: "God IS love and you cannot know God if you do not love." He reminds his readers that God loved us so deeply and completely, that God became human, sent his Son to take away our sins to bring us closer to God. Then John says, "My dear friends, if God loved us like this, we certainly ought to love each other. If we love each other, God is in us." God IS love. That is a remarkable concept. In all of its various manifestations, Love is God.

As we think about what love looks like on this Valentines Day, let us think not only about romance, chocolate, hearts, and flowers, although those are wonderful and beautiful things. Let us also reflect upon God as love in the flesh, a love vividly revealed in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Because that really is what love looks like. Let us pray...

Most gracious God:

Today we thank your for giving us the capacity to love, for giving us people to love, and people who love us. Teach us to love and not count the cost, and to aspire toward a love that bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, and endures all things. Amen.

