

Just Love One Another!

Psalm 98: 1-9

John 15: 9-17

“This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you.”

What can be so difficult about these words from our John passage today? It's a simple statement, clearly put, in words that everyone should be able to comprehend. It's stated over and over in scriptures in a multitude of similar ways. It is said to be the single most important commandment, that pretty much all others are derived from. So why is this so hard for us humans?

In these tumultuous times, where every headline seems to scream of conflict, disaster, and division, we find ourselves yearning for hope and healing. Everyday, the world just seems to teeter on the edge of chaos, and our hearts ache for a way forward. In the midst of this storm, Jesus' words from John 13 and echoed in John 15 should be seared into our brains: “A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another: just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another.” **JUST LOVE ONE ANOTHER!**

No matter where we get our news from, we are bombarded with stories of strife: political tensions, natural disasters, senseless wars and human suffering. We are witnessing a clash of ideologies such as we haven't seen since the civil war. And the cries of the marginalized, and the brokenness and divisiveness of our world just add to it. It's easy to feel overwhelmed, to retreat into our own circles, and to forget that we are called by Christ to love beyond our comfort zones.

Last month Rod and I attended a “required” training for clergy in the PNK. We of course complained about being **REQUIRED** to go, but once we got there, we understood why they felt the need to have such training. You see, the level of divisiveness within our own individual churches has reached the point where the Presbytery felt they had to call a meeting to discuss and seek answers as to how we, as pastors, can deal with these issues within our own congregations. And this one, all day meeting with an “expert speaker” was even deemed not enough; we have two more scheduled.

What a sad state of affairs that such a meeting was ever needed. How can we ignore God's greatest and simplest commandment to the point that so many of us cannot even get along even within our own congregations? This point was brought home quite quickly to me at the meeting. For one of the

discussions we were numbered off and asked to sit in groups with that number, so that the pastors in each group were random. Then we were asked to discuss the issue of immigration, and how we should be handling that issue in our churches. It took about 1 minute for the pastors in my group to start getting upset with each other and things got a bit heated. Multiply that now out to the entire Presbytery, and you can see the problem.

As most of you know, I do not believe that politics should be preached from the pulpit. I believe that if I am talking about individual candidates or telling people how they should vote on any given issue, I am no longer preaching the good news. Was Jesus rather radical in his politics, was he being political in his own way? Yes he was, and this can be discussed—although if you read the gospel accounts you will note that he steadfastly refused to directly condemn any politician of the time. Instead, he always directed those political questions back to God’s kingdom. And we should do likewise. This is not to say that our own individual opinions must be stifled, it’s just that we as a society cannot seem to express our own opinions without bashing other’s opinions. And as such, I feel that church and church events and groups should be one place that we can all feel safe in not engaging in divisive politics. Certainly, we can and should all have our own individual beliefs, but this church should be a judgment-free zone. For us here at Potwin, it’s not such a huge issue—we tend to be pretty much in agreement about most things, but that is a rarity in churches today. In talking to pastors from other churches, both in the PNK and other places, the gulf between their congregants with different political views is wide and ugly and growing. How does one handle this as a pastor or as a Session?

Our world has become very complicated in recent decades. We are manipulated by various media, controlled by entities with very specific agendas. Foreign enemies use bots to create “news items” that are meant to divide us as a country and a people—a modern twist on the old “divide and conquer” theory. The explosion of the internet and artificial intelligence has created millions of opportunities to dupe us, to scam us, to manipulate us. And every happening around the world is couched in a way that pits person against person. Radical agendas on both ends of the spectrum tell us who to hate, whether its about diversity, immigration, abortion, Jews versus Palestinians, sexual orientations, gun control vs. gun rights, climate disruption, left vs. right. Everything that happens is presented as a wedge issue that we’re encouraged to choose sides on. The sides we choose are deeply entrenched, even passed on from generation to generation. Add to

this extreme weather events, economic issues and a multitude of other current events, and we're left with a society in total chaos—one where everyone is mad, all the time.

Yet, in this very moment, Jesus' command still resounds: "Just Love one another."

Jesus didn't merely instruct us to love; He demonstrated it. His love wasn't theoretical or abstract; it was tangible, sacrificial, and radical. He washed the feet of His disciples, dined with sinners, and forgave those who betrayed Him. His love knew no bounds, had no conditions. He laid down His life for us, the ultimate act of selflessness.

There is a story told that when Christ had finished his work on earth, and had ascended into heaven, the angel Gabriel met him. 'Lord,' said Gabriel, 'is it permitted to ask what plans you have made for carrying on your work on earth?'

'I have chosen a few good men and women, and given them direction' said Christ, 'They will carry out my simple message to "Love One Another" to the whole world'.

'But', said the angel, 'What if these people fail you- what is your back-up plan?'

Jesus smiled and said 'There is no other plan'. We ARE the plan.

We, too, are called to love like Jesus. But what does that look like practically? It's not just warm feelings or sentimental gestures. It's rolling up our sleeves and stepping into the messiness of humanity. It's listening to the hurting, feeding the hungry, and standing up against injustice. It's choosing compassion over condemnation, grace over judgment.

The simple command to "love one another" is a reminder for us, both in a more worldly sense, and in a local sense, such as within our own church -- that we all have a calling, a duty, to keep and contribute to the unity of the Spirit.

Remember that we are all bound to One Lord, One God, One Faith and One Baptism. The gifts we have all been given are meant to build up members of the body for service... and that's why we're here... to serve. We are to use the gifts we have been given for the building up of the church (both local and universal) and for the glory of God. The same God dwells in each of us.

The same Holy Spirit. If differences of opinion arise, maybe it is because we are listening to ourselves and not to God. Now is the time to listen more intently to His will.

We are the Church – all of us. It's we the people, not the building. We must remember that we are God's people, bringing together the gifts we have been equipped with. We are to offer our diverse talents to each other with love, compassion and patience for each other. God's will is that we be a healthy church. To be a healthy church, we must be followers of Christ, not some pastor or politician. We must know Christ, truly, genuinely, really. And our actions and opinions should show this in how we deal with and treat all others.

Jesus shattered all social norms. He loved Samaritans, tax collectors, and outcasts. He crossed boundaries, and His love knew no borders. Today, we must break down our own walls that divide us. Love isn't limited to those who look like us, think like us, or believe like us. It extends to the refugee, the neighbor, the immigrant, the stranger. It's a radical, countercultural love that defies division.

The Good news is this—we are all in this together – The Holy Spirit calls us all to be the people of God, united in Christ – the church body. Christ has no backup plan. He trusts us and sends us out by the power of the Spirit to love others. So long as we set our course by the example set by Jesus, we shall always find our direction.

And so, let us go forth from this place today, transformed by Christ's love. Let us be agents of reconciliation in this world and not promoters of division. May our actions and words always be a testament to His presence in us and among us.

Let it be so Lord, let it be so, Amen.