

EASTER FIVE, YEAR C, MAY 15, 2022

Back in the sixties a creative young associate pastor put a colorful poster in the narthex of the church that contained a four letter word. At the next Session meeting an elder spoke indignantly about the "suggestive" sign with the dirty, immoral message someone had put in the church. Everyone was confused and asked what sign was he talking about and what was the message. He told them it was the word LOVE, right there in the entrance of the sanctuary were the bold letters. L-O-V-E, and it offended his sensibilities. He was reminded that it is a biblical word and that we are all commanded to love one another but he claimed to be wiser than the others and knew its subtle, intended meanings.

Such is the controversial word love. There is probably no other word that has been confused, contradictory, corrupted, blurred and have multiple meanings as that one over-used, inadequate, abused word love. We speak of "love nest", "making love", "love never fails", "God is love", "the love commandment", "falling in love", and " God so loved the world".

My question to all of you this morning, is what does the word love mean to you? How do you express it to your family and friends? In my family one way that we express our love for each other is by sending funny, sometimes inappropriate cards on special occasions. My daughter's Mother's Day card to me was a perfect example of this. It said, "A good mom lets you lick the mixer. A great mom turns it off first?" The tradition continues.

In this week's gospel from John, Jesus told his disciples: I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.

It's a commandment but how in the world can we be commanded to love? It's hard enough sometimes loving family members let alone total strangers or, God forbid, our enemies. What in the world is Jesus asking of us? Does he really mean it? We know love is hard work. You just have to look at all the books that have been written about love. "Women Who Love Too Much" , "Men Who Can't Love", "How to love yourself", "Love is a choice", "Getting the Love you want". There are tons of books on relationships, communication, and emotional health.

And Jesus dares to tell us simply to love. It should be simple, right? Love one another. It's just a three word commandment. It's not that complex. Then why is it so hard to find love when it's something we all want. Sometimes I think we forget that love is not a limited resource It's not like it's going to run out. Love is an unlimited resource so why is it scarce? From birth to death we crave to be loved. At every stage of life we crave to be valued and appreciated, to be treated with kindness and respect without strings attached because that's what love means. We all have love to give. Jesus says it should be the simplest thing in the world.

But it isn't because of our brokenness – our misuse of love . We love conditionally with strings attached: I'll love you if you get good grades. I'll love you if you make a good living, I'll love you if you do what I tell you to do. All this does is to warp love into greed, selfishness and anger. We have turned it into something you have to do in order to deserve love. One of the greatest sins to teach our children is that they have to do

something in order to be loveable. That you have to deserve love. Our world says in order to be loved you need to be successful, good looking, powerful, smart, etc. Then you'll be loved. But this is not what Jesus said and it's not God talk either.

Some youngsters were asked a question which posed an ethical dilemma. "If you were drowning would you rather see a very loving person who couldn't swim walk by on the shore, or an unloving, uncaring person who could swim? One boy thought intently about it for a moment and answered, "A loving and good person". "Why?" "Because", he replied, "that person would go and get someone who had a boat".

This is the kind of love that Jesus is talking about – agape love. Jesus calls us to agape, self-sacrificial love. This is love that has to do with how we act toward one another, not how we feel about each other. Feelings are, in many ways, uncontrollable. You can't help liking some people more than others, just like we like some foods and dislike others. But, God calls us to move beyond our likes and dislikes, beyond our feelings, so that we may behave in a loving manner to all people. This is the kind of love that we are called to give.

Agape love takes people seriously. Agape love looks at the person and takes time to see him or her as that person is. Agape love pushes through the hate, the prejudices, the disagreements to see the individual as another child of God. Agape love tells us not to ignore those who are different from us and try to diminish them by indifference. Love conveys value. Love doesn't just respond to worth. Love creates worth.

There's a story about a woman who had a brother who was one of the most disreputable human beings anyone ever met. He was mean to his wife, ignored his children, avoided honest work like the plague and was known far and wide as the biggest and most brazen liar in half the state.

One day this woman and one of her many grand-daughters were sitting on the front porch rocking and gossiping about many things including her brother. One of the granddaughters maintained that her uncle was beyond hope and a serious embarrassment to herself and every member of the family. She filled her Grandma in on his latest episodes of public nonsense.

Grandma just rocked and nodded and listened and finally she said, "I'm sure everything you say is true. Still, Jesus loves your Uncle." The granddaughter sputtered, "I doubt that, I don't think even Jesus could love him." "Yes child," Grandma said, "Jesus loves everybody and Jesus loves your uncle too. Then she stopped rocking and sat perfectly still and said, "Course, that could be 'cause Jesus doesn't know your Uncle as good as we do".

The truth is Jesus does love him; but not because he didn't know him very well, but because he knew him completely and totally, and cared about him in spite of what he knew. He tells us to love as he loves us. Love without conditions. Love in spite of a person's past. Love and be honest with them. Love enough to forgive. Love sacrificially. You and I are to love as Jesus did because that's what God does. This is the love that conquers the sin of hate, prejudice and indifference.

This love is at the heart of our faith and the heart of life. If you take Christianity and boil it down to its very essence. If you boil away all the peripheral concerns what remains is not a doctrine, a creed, a set of rules, or confession. What remains is a face. It is the face of absolute unambiguous love.

It is so obvious yet so elusive. Living is about loving and being a Christian is about living sacrificially as Jesus did. The purpose of life is love. The purpose of life is to love others and ourselves. Purpose of life is to give oneself to those around you – children, spouse, friend, community, hungry, poor and the lost. It is so simple but we don't get it. The meaning of life is not found in taking. The meaning of life is found in giving. If you want love give it. If you want friendship give it. If you want security and health and wholeness then work to make others secure, healthy and whole. It may not be easy but it's clear We can't say we didn't know. Jesus told us over and over and over again through his words, his life, and his death. Love one another as I have loved you. It's a simple commandment but it's enough to fill a lifetime. Amen.