

Easter 6 (B)
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Text: John 15:9-17

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The Gospel of Mark tells about a young man who came to Jesus asking for spiritual direction. “Teacher,” he said, “what must I do to inherit eternal life?” Jesus said, “You know the commandments: You shall not murder, you shall not commit adultery, you shall not bear false witness.” The man replied, “I have kept all of these since my youth.” And Jesus looked at him and loved him. And said, “You lack one thing: go, sell what you own, give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me.” But when the man heard this, he was shocked, and went away sad, because he had many possessions.

Today we hear so much about love. In our Gospel text, Jesus says, “As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love.” And Jesus commands us to love each other as he has loved us—I thought we ought to begin by recalling what Jesus’ love looked like in action. We all share one big obstacle to understanding Jesus. We’ve been raised in a culture that sentimentalizes love, making it out to be warm, fuzzy feelings. So it’s natural for that way of thinking to spill over into our talk about God, and what it means to say God loves us. But when Jesus looked at the young man with love, he told him the hardest, most painful truth. And the man was shocked, and he went away sad.

To talk about love as Christians means to let go of sentimentality. In *The Brothers Karamozov*, Dostoyevsky says that “Love in practice is a harsh and dreadful thing compared to love in dreams.” In a dream world, love can be nice and simple. In a dream world, love can be all warm feelings toward nice people. But in the real world, where there are so many ugly realities, love is not simple. It might be warm and tender and gentle, like a mother cuddling her baby. Or perhaps it will need to be strong, fiercely defending, tough love, like a mother tiger protecting her cubs from danger.

So love might give us comfort and peace, or meet us with a jarring wake-up call, requiring us to let go of something that is doing harm to ourselves or to others. Perhaps love will call us to take some risk, or to make some sacrifice, for the sake of a loved one. And to be the one who loves might mean having your heart broken. In fact, that’s exactly what the Bible says God endures because of his love for us, for the human family. In the cross of Jesus, God embraces the very worst humanity is capable of, in order to save us and show us what love is really like. The Bible says God is love—but not a sappy, sentimental love; rather love that lays down his life for his friends.

It’s enough to make the sentimentalizing of our culture look downright appealing. Well, almost enough. Because in the end, a sentimental kind of love, love

that is all about warm fuzzy feelings—it isn't strong enough to endure. It isn't robust enough to meet the challenges of life, to stay steady through all of the grim and difficult times that life brings. When the Bible speaks of love, when it uses the Greek word, agape, it isn't referring to a way of feeling. It refers to a way of acting. It means acting in a way that honors and values the other, while also recognizing the truth and reality of how things are. It means acting in a way that seeks what is best, what will give life, what will serve the cause of wholeness and healing. That is the kind of love Jesus commands us to show for each other.

It's hard, but to do anything less is to betray the reason we are alive. We aren't on this planet just to work at a job or buy things or keep ourselves entertained. We have life so we can love, so that our lives can be full of passion. God calls every one of us to be partners in God's great work of love to heal and renew creation. Jesus puts it this way, picking up the image of the vine and branches that we heard last week. He says to us, "I appointed you to go and bear fruit, fruit that will last." The fruit of our lives is the way love gets worked out in our actions and our relationships. Each of us has our own places in life where we can be part of God's great work of love. You and I, we don't do the whole thing. But we should never make little of the opportunities we are given. Individually, each of us has a chance to be God's instrument of wholeness and peace in our family, in our job, our neighborhood.

But there's more, because we are more than just solitary individuals. In our life together as a congregation we are able to do things we could never accomplish by ourselves. As a community together we are passing the faith on to our children. We are feeding neighbors who come here to share food and friendship. We're learning together how to care for this beautiful creation. And as a congregation of the Oregon Synod, as part of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, we are helping victims of disasters, and training seminary students, and supporting mission projects around the world. In all of these ways, and more, we are part of God's work of love, to reach out, to share, to raise this world up by the power of love.

Of course there is a cost. Love always has a cost, in big ways and small. But it is also the source of our deepest joy, the wellspring that feeds our lives. For example, this morning, you could be out puttering in the garden, or napping in front of the TV, but you're here, opening your life to be shaped by Jesus, offering your whole self for God's purposes in the world. And you experience the joy of singing praise to God and sharing with a joyful and lively community of people who are also seeking to give their lives for the sake of love. There is joy in sharing something important with friends, knowing that you are making a real difference, that you are plugged in to your true purpose in life—living with love.

Jesus says, “I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and your joy may be complete.” Joy may or may not mean dancing in the aisles—I certainly wouldn’t object if you did. Joy means a sense of delight, delighting in the goodness of God, and resting in that goodness. In the end, it is our joy and delight to share in God’s love for the world. We experience the joy of being part of something much larger than our own small lives. We are filled with joy because we belong—we belong to God and we belong to the family of God’s people that stretches around the world, and we belong to each other here—as a community of prayer and hope and compassion. We are lifted up by the joy of knowing that God’s purposes for life and love will have the last word for us and for this whole world. The end of our story is not grim or sad, but light and joy and peace and love. Thanks be to God. Amen