

Love One Another
John 14:15-21, selected verses
March 17, 2024
Pastor Sarah Wiles

¹⁵ “If you love me, you will keep my commandments... ¹⁸ “I won’t leave you as orphans. I will come to you. ¹⁹ Soon the world will no longer see me, but you will see me. Because I live, you will live too. ²⁰ On that day you will know that I am in my Father, you are in me, and I am in you. ²¹ Whoever has my commandments and keeps them loves me. Whoever loves me will be loved by my Father, and I will love them and reveal myself to them.”

...

Jesus, in John, talks and talks and talks. Our text today is from his last night with his disciples. The other three gospels tell a pithy little story about a meal. But in the gospel of John, there’s no meal. Jesus washes his disciple’s feet, just as Mary washed his a few nights before, and then he talks. For four straight chapters. It goes on and on and on.

But the heart of it is very simple: “If you love me, you will keep my commandments.” He comes back to that again and again. And the commandment he gives in John is “Love one another.” “Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another.”

Which seems easy enough. Especially when you compare it with the love commandments in the other gospels which tell us to love our neighbors, in other words, everybody, and even to love our enemies. In the gospel of John, he just tells his closest followers to love each other. Just the people in this room. Just love them. That seems... kind of cliquey, kind of exclusive, kind of stingy. We’re just supposed to love other Christians? That’s it?

Although... I do have to admit, there are some Christians who are pretty difficult to love. You know what I mean. Honestly, give me a good Buddhist or humanist over some Christians any day of the week.

Church fights can be some of the most brutal. We don’t tend to kill each other over the finer points of the doctrine of the trinity anymore, but we can still be pretty awful to one another. If you’ve ever been run off or forced out of a community that was your home, I’m so sorry. I know how deep that pain can cut. And I think we all—no matter what our theology—have other Christians we’d rather not claim.

So, maybe Jesus’ command in the gospel of John isn’t the easy way out. Sometimes it’s those closest to us that are hardest to love.

If you stick around here in this community, which is truly a healthy, kind community, long enough and form deep enough relationships, you will get disappointed, you will get hurt. Because, well, we’re all just people, doing the best we can, with all our baggage and hang-ups and shortcomings. People hurt each other and disappoint each other. Committing to love someone else through those disappointments, that’s real community. That’s real love.

I may have told you about the member of my last congregation, a very proper church lady who was widowed after an almost fifty-year marriage, who said she always cried at weddings, not because it was so beautiful, but because the couple didn’t know what they were in for.

She wasn’t wrong. Our dearest relationships, whether romantic or familial or friendly or faith-based, have the capacity for the deepest disappointment. And Jesus is saying, love *these* folks, the ones right here, closest to you. Love them through it all.

And just like it's easier to love abstract people somewhere over there, it's also easier to love theoretically or philosophically. Actually, doing the stuff of love is harder and more boring and messier—physically and emotionally.

I think Jesus knew that. The gospel of John is the one that is filled with soaring language and big claims about Jesus' divinity. But it is also relentlessly physical and committed to Jesus' full humanity. It's in John that we get the assertion that all holiness dwells in the flesh. It's in John that Jesus cries. And it's in John that Jesus gets down on his knees, on the hard ground, and washes his friends' dusty, dirty, quite possibly stinky feet.

Look at your feet. If you're wearing slip on shoes, maybe slip them off for a minute and peek at your feet. If you can't, just imagine what your feet look like right now inside your socks or shoes. Seriously, look down. For some of us, I'm guessing, just the act of *looking* at our own feet, even when they're covered up, is uncomfortable, at least in a space like this where we feel like we're supposed to be put together and well-behaved.

Feet tell the truth. With their calluses and bunions and sometimes funky toenails, they tell us how we move, how tired we might be, how much help we might need. Jesus gets down on the floor and washes them, just as Mary washed his feet a few days before.

It doesn't get much more real than that.

We can get carried away with talk of the Spirit and Christology and soteriology—those are just the fancy words for what we think about Jesus and salvation. But Jesus says this is truth: dirty feet and love that levels the playing field.

Last week we talked about the necessity of beauty and extravagance, Mary's grand gesture. This is a grand gesture in its own way, but one that doesn't cost a penny, that is grand in its simplicity and humility.

For Jesus what counts is definitely not an abstract, metaphysical, philosophical understanding of the nature of love. And it is not pretty cards or sweet-smelling roses or meals by candlelight. Those are all lovely. But for Jesus, love starts with dirty feet.

Maybe in your house love starts with piles of dirty laundry or dirty dishes, wiping snot or wiping dirty bottoms.

I'm pretty sure that around here love starts with cleaning up crumbs and loading the dishwasher after cookies and lemonade, and youth picking up our little glass cups with smudges and grape juice stains after communion, and ushers going through and gathering up all the stuff we leave behind after worship. It's Glad, the man from Haiti who keeps our building clean, and the people who stay till the very end of an event to tie off the trash bags and carry them out, and the folks who get down on their knees in the dirt to weed and tend this land.

This is love, says Jesus. This is what matters. When you don't know what else to do, start here.

- Sarah W. Wiles, 2024