

Text: John 15:12-15.

**"This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. Greater love has no one than this, that someone lay down his life for his friends. You are my friends if you do what I command you. No longer do I call you servants, for the servant does not know what his master is doing; but I have called you friends, for all that I have heard from my Father I have made known to you."**

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

Christ is risen. He is risen indeed. Alleluia!

Our sermon text this morning speaks about love. Specifically, it speaks about an agape love, a love that is greater than the rest because it is God's love. In the Greek, there are several types of love: there is a love like a brother, called a philia kind of love. This is where we get the word Philadelphia, the City of Brotherly Love. There is also an eros kind of love, that is the love shared in marriage between a husband and wife, an intimate kind of love. The love between a parent and child in the Greek is called a storge kind of love. And there is God's love. A greater love. A love that is sacrificial.

**"This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you."** It is impossible to be a friend of Jesus, to be his disciple, without coming face to face with the imperative command to **"love one another."** Loving one another is hard. It means loving your enemies and to pray for those who persecute you. To love one another means that you love your neighbor as you love yourself. Scripture reminds us, **"If anyone has the world's goods and sees his brother in need, yet closes his heart against him, how does God's love abide in him? Little children, let us not love in word or talk but in deed and in truth" (1 John 3:17).**

Verse after verse we are called to love God and to love one another. So much so that when asked by the disciples which commandment is greatest, Jesus summarized the entire 10 Commandments for them in His answer, **"Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the great and first commandment. And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself" (Matthew 22:37-39).**

And the disciples were smart, and feeling like His command was too broad, they asked Jesus to narrow their focus a little by asking "Who is my neighbor?" "Surely Jesus

doesn't mean to love everybody. He means to only love those who deserve our love. Right? Doesn't He?" Well...no. To love your neighbor is not to just love those who you feel deserve to be loved. Rather, it means to love even those who are unloving toward you. Those who hurt you, hit you, abandon you, and forsake you.

Such a heavy request from our Lord to love others. We are much better at loving ourselves. So much so that our world can simply be defined with one word: ME! It's all about me. It's about what I want, what I believe, what I want to do with my body, who I say I am, about how and where I feel safe, wanted, and accepted. Me, me, me, me, me. No wonder men and women today don't even know who they are anymore. This kind of 'self-love', only leads to self-absorption, self-doubt, and ultimately a loss of self-worth. And yet it is repeated and praised by the world over and over and over again.

This is not the kind of love that Jesus was talking about in our text this morning. Jesus calls us His friends and says to us, **"as I have loved you, so you love one another."** This command takes the golden rule, and ups the ante. No longer is it "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you." No, now it becomes, "Do unto others as I have done unto you." Certainly God loves us. We see His sacrificial agape love for us on the cross. Our Lord commands us to love like Him because He has been unloved like us. He bleeds and suffers for us. He endures ridicule and shame, like we do. He understands loneliness, abandonment, and heartache like we do because He experienced it too. He becomes sin, our sin, the sin of the entire world. We consider the cross and what sacrificial love for us is every time we read His Word and hear it preached, when we remember our baptism, and each and every time we come to His loving sacrificial table for us. Receive His true body and blood for us, for the forgiveness of our sin, reminds us of how great the command is to love God and to love others.

What does this sacrificial loving of our neighbor look like for us? It begins by understanding that love is a verb. It's an action word. It means forgiving someone who has wronged you, even if you vehemently despise them. It means going to someone whom you've wronged and confessing that to them and receiving their forgiveness, their absolution. It even means to swallow our pride and to give selflessly of yourself for someone else, even if they are your enemy, if you despise them, or if you can't stand to look at them or be around them. It requires sacrifice and not cheap grace. It is loving them as God loves us, even so far as to lay down our life if needs be.

Our military men and women and law enforcement friends and family understand this fully. They know that there are people in this world who hates them, who wishes them ill-will, and who seek them out to kill them. And yet they volunteer to serve

understanding that it may mean giving their life for their enemies. **"Greater love has no one than this, that someone lay down his life for his friends."**

And it is the same way in the church. Every day we hear on the news, read in the papers and social media, or see on television people trying to silence Christians. Sometimes that means suing them. Sometimes it means slandering them falsely. And sometimes it means putting Christians to death. Jesus said the world will hate us because they hate Him. And yet, even when they hate us and everything we as Christians stand for, God commands us to pray for them and to love them, **"Forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us."** He never said it would be easy. Taking up your cross and following Him, being His disciple will never be without hardship and trials. To love God and to love your neighbor means to begin your love from its origin and that is Christ and Him crucified. For at the cross, God gives us His agape love.

I like the way St. Paul puts it in his letter to the church at Ephesus, **"Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you" (Ephesians 4:32).** Friends, love God, love each other, and love your neighbor. It won't be easy. You will mess up and you will at times be unloving. When you are and when you do, know that Jesus loves you and that He died for you, and that here, in His Word, at the font, at the Holy Table, and in absolution, that you can receive His grace, forgiveness, and peace. Amen.

Now may the peace of God which surpasses all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.