

West Branch Friends Meeting
September 8, 2019
“Living a Life of Love”

Many of you know I talk a lot about love in my messages! At the close of each worship service, I like to send everyone off joining together to echo the phrase “God is love, all the time; and all the time, God is love” as a reminder that living a life of love should be our goal as followers of Jesus’ teachings. But *saying* loving words isn’t difficult, *living* that life of love, however, is sometimes a bit trickier! We are all flawed humans with egos that try hard to protect us from words or actions that we might not like.

There are 40 scriptures explaining what living a life of love should look like, many of them very familiar to us. We can start with this one from Proverbs 17: 17:

“A friend loves at all times.”

Sure! But does that mean if we don’t love at all times we aren’t a friend? And once again – how do we love at ALL times? Especially if we are trying to follow those very familiar, often used in wedding ceremonies love verses from I Corinthians 13: 4-8:

“Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It does not dishonor ourselves, it is not self-seeking it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres. Love never fails.

Or even this one from Colossians 3: 12-14 from The Message:

So, chosen by God for this new life of love, dress in the wardrobe God picked out for you: compassion, kindness, humility, quiet strength, discipline. Be even-tempered, content with second place, quick to forgive an offense. Forgive as quickly and completely as the Master forgave you. And regardless of what else you put on, wear love. It’s your basic, all-purpose garment. Never be without it.

Do you ever hear some of these verses and just think: living that kind of love all the time is basically hopeless? I do! But I have also come to the conclusion that there are some things we can do to really develop ways we can try our best to live a life of love. So here are several ideas we might use to develop that kind of love.

Obviously, number one is to fully realize God is a God of love. As Quakers, we are fond of saying we believe that there is that of God in every person. But I'm not sure we always really believe that statement, especially in those people we see harming any of God's creations, including our fellow humans sharing this earth with us.

Many sitting in our church pews on Sundays often hear how the Old Testament Israelite God was a God of vengeance, destroying all the enemies of the Jews. Which always led me to believe that if there are those who do really evil things, like mass killings, they might somehow be in line for God's wrath to punish them. But if I truly believe God is love, as we read together in our call to worship, then maybe we need to put aside those Old Testament writings and consider them to be the understandings of an ancient people who were trying to figure out life as tribal survivors the best way they could.

Jesus and Paul both spoke of a God of love; an unconditional love that is there for us no matter how many times we are unkind, selfish, ego-driven, or have hateful thoughts. God's love is freely given – and we call it God's grace – God's love for each of us that we haven't done anything to deserve.

Then, once we accept that God is a God of love, we can move on to figuring out what to do with that love! It might be easy to just sit back and think we don't need to do anything special to be loved by God, so we don't. But I don't believe that's living a life of love. So here's my second way to strive to live a life of love: we can start with small steps, one day at a time. I will change my thinking from 'some day I will be patient and kind', to 'NOW I will look for opportunities to be patient and kind' – or any of those other traits associated with love from I Corinthians 13. For me, it starts with realizing the affect my words might have on another person.

I've always been an independent sort of person (which means I tended to argue a lot with my parents because I was sure I was right about whatever topic we were discussing). Over the years I've come to really listen to myself and I realize I still argue quite a bit with people when I'm sure I'm right (and obviously, they're wrong)! But what if I would just stop and take the time to really think about what the other person is saying? In most cases, I know my responses would be more loving.

Another way to live that life of love, probably the most important nugget of truth I've gleaned the past 20 years or so, is that the best way I can learn to live a life of love is to surround myself with other people who truly do live that life of love; and then I can learn from them. I kind of figured out a long time ago that I can be a pretty selfish person. I can be selfish with my time, my finances, my inner most thoughts. I don't want people to really know the 'real' me because I often feel like I'm not as good a person as several of my friends who are always jumping in to help anyone in need. Or I'm not going to do as much as I could with my finances because I might need more in my retirement years. But I've also found that I'm often drawn to people who give of themselves in very unselfish ways, and I am learning how to be more giving - which leads to loving.

Jesus' example, that we are called to follow, was one of giving love to those that his society considered unlovable. He hung out with the despised tax collectors; and he walked in the leper colonies where 'nice' Jews weren't caught dead going. He didn't hang out with the rich and famous in his day - the rulers in both the government and the synagogues. He spoke to the poor villagers who came to him in masses, and told them that the most important things they could do to be his followers were to love God and love their neighbors.

So after thinking about all these ways I can do a better job living a life of love, I have to come back to Jesus' two greatest commandments - the only commandments found in all four gospels. Here it is from Mark 12: 28-31

“One of the teachers of the law came and heard them debating. Noticing that Jesus had given them a good answer, he asked him, “Of all the commandments, which is the most important?”

Jesus said, "The first in importance is, 'Listen, Israel: The Lord your God is one; so love the Lord God with all your passion and prayer and intelligence and energy.' And here is the second: 'Love others as well as you love yourself.' There is no other commandment that ranks with these."

And finally, I have to love myself, and forgive myself when I don't live up to the standard for love I've set for myself. I just have to realize that God's love resides within me and I have to let that love infiltrate all the areas of my life so that I can do a better job loving others. And probably one of the ways I really am trying to show love is through compassion. Trying to truly feel what another is going through – not to give that person my good advice, but to simply BE THERE to help in any way I can. And my ego always fights me on it – let someone else who is better at being compassionate take care of it. But that one baby step at a time is a good way for me to keep focusing on letting my love be demonstrated through my compassion.

We aren't perfect and never will be, but I do believe we are called to live that life of love, and we can do it by fully understanding what it means when we first believe that God is love. Then we can begin to start with small steps, looking for ways to show love in the here and now. And finally, by making sure we are surrounding ourselves with those who are doing a really great job of living a life of love, we can learn about showing love from them.

I really liked this quote I read this week by Jonas Ellison. He writes:

"Yes, God loves every single one of us just as we are in all our imperfection, sloppiness, pettiness, and greed. But that doesn't mean we can't dream of/strive for a better life. It doesn't mean we can't do things to live well."

And, I might add, love well. I believe it's the core message of Jesus' life as our example for loving God and our neighbors. I believe we are called to live a life of love, and it doesn't always come easily...but bit-by-bit we can allow God's love to shine through our words and actions to help make a difference in this world.

