

To Love Like God Does

A sermon by the Rev. Dr. Robert D. Flanagan for
The Fifth Sunday of Easter, Year C, John 13:31-35

“Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another.”

One afternoon, a pair of vestry members marched into my office. They were on a tear, upset at me and others in the congregation. They wanted to bully me into agreeing with them. I let them start, and they went on for a time. One of them then said, “Well! This is not much of a Christian community.” They went on some more. Then I said, “Why do you think Gospels and the Letters Paul and others spend so much time talking about love?” I quoted a few examples for them. They couldn’t answer me. I then said, “Perhaps, it’s because the early Christians were having a hard time loving each other and decided to be reminded of love often.” They didn’t like my answer.

Many people think of love as a simple concept: like getting along with each other, being friendly to be around you, expressing familial affection and loyalty, or being a bit more than pleasant to your neighbor. Love, however, is much more complicated, rich, and dynamic.

Think about how we use the word love. We of course use it to express pleasure. When eating, you might say, “I love this food.” When talking about your favorite sports team or game, you may say, “I love the Yankees, or I love playing cards.” You might also say, “I loved that book, movie, or restaurant.” You wouldn’t say, “You have to go to this restaurant I just tried. I liked it and so will you.” No. You say, “You will love it.” So, we use love to express a feeling of delight or pleasure.

We use love in other ways too. We use love as an aesthetical expression. We may say, “I love nature,” and then go on to describe the ways we’re protecting it. We may say that we love an artist’s painting or sculpture. We use love in those instances to express our acknowledgment of beauty or the feelings that art evokes in us.

We, of course, say we love people and pets. For instance, “I would say I love my cat.” (It’s my daughter’s cat really, but her life is too complex to have a cat, so it lives at our house.) And I would say, “I love my sister. I love my children. I love my spouse.” But I would likely get in trouble if I said, “I love my neighbor.” And I would be in hot water if I said, “I love his wife, or I love his husband.” While many often think of love as a simple concept, it is complicated, rich, and dynamic.

When Jesus said, “Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another,” what did he mean? I must start with a note about the translation. Our reading says that you “should love one another.” Another translation says that you “must love one another.” Another one says that you “are to love one another.” The biblical Greek version says, “Love one another.” You see how love can be complicated, even in the Bible.

The type of love Jesus was talking about is a love that comes from God. Divine love has three qualities (Vanstone, 58). God’s love is limitless, vulnerable, and precarious.

Let’s start with limitlessness. We know that the universe is ever-expanding. Its borders have not stopped increasing from the moment after the Big Bang to this day. While pointing our

giant telescopes toward its edge, they cannot see the universe's end. Its limitlessness is beyond our comprehension. The same is true regarding the limitlessness of God's love. God's love is such that it exceeds the boundaries of the universe, and wherever the universe may continue to expand, God's love has already been there.

Despite the limitlessness of divine love, it is vulnerable. God holds nothing back (60.) God has emptied himself/herself completely of love, pouring across the whole universe the love of God. The universe ripples with the love of God, because God gift of love is total, complete, and emptying.

God's love is also precarious. He/She gave this love and risks that it will be rejected. Creation has the agency and the power to ignore, shun, dismiss, disregard, and discard it. Therefore, the outcome is not assured. The result could be triumphant or tragic. It could come to glory or ruin. All could be gained or lost. God's love could be rejected by his/her creation and creatures. God has, thus, risked everything in his/her love of creation and love of us.

When considering Jesus's statement, "Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another," we must view it from the three aspects of divine love. Jesus calls the Church and all Christians to love limitlessly, knowing that doing so means being vulnerable and that the outcome of such love is precarious. The Church could be rejected. Christians could be rejected. The Church could collapse and go away. Christianity might fade away. If that happens God's love is diminished and discarded.

If we apply it to our lives at St. Thomas, this means we love each other completely, totally, and emptying. We do so, knowing that our experiment or attempt at divine love may fail. We do so, knowing that our love may be disregarded or rejected. Even so, we love. Even though, the church might fade away or become irrelevant, we love.

Those vestry members, who marched into my office, do not belong to that church anymore. I'm not surprised. They thought the Christian community was a place where they got their way. They rejected the love of God. They discarded that church.

Love in the Christian community is one that is vulnerable and precarious, meaning none of us gets our way. Christian love means that we offer our hand even though we may be rejected. Christian love means we give our love away with no regard to its return. We love not to gain or profit. We love because God loves us, nothing more.

Sources:

Lewis, C.S. *The Four Loves*. New York: Harcourt Brace & Co., 1960.

Vanstone, W.H. *Love's Endeavour Love's Expense: The Response of Being to the Love of God*. London: Darton, Longman and Todd Ltd., 1977.