



PASTOR GWEN'S SERMON
5TH SUNDAY OF EASTER
"THE GREATEST LOVE STORY"
SUNDAY, MAY 18, 2025

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. AMEN

Christ is Risen! He is risen indeed! Alleluia!

I don't know about you, but I love a good love story. Nothing like a good love story movie: Doctor Zhivago, Love Story, Titanic, Casablanca, or Gone With the Wind. However, one of my favorite down-to-earth, real-life love stories is portrayed in American Underdog, and it's not a classic. And no, it is not a baseball movie! I hope that you will forgive me if you have heard this one before. You know how you love something so much that you cannot help but tell others about it. Well, I'll recap.

A stock boy in a grocery store falls for an older woman, 26-year-old Brenda. Brenda is hesitant to go out with Kurtis as she has two children and cannot afford a babysitter. Well, eventually she allows the younger stock boy 22, to meet her children. One is a cute little gal and the other a boy with disabilities. From my experience, most men would run fast in the opposite direction. But not Kurtis. He had the love of God in his heart and also fell head over heels in love with both children. He marries the mom, and he adopts both kids. Today Kurtis and Brenda, Mr. and Mrs. Kurt Warner, run several charities to help children with different abilities to enjoy and make the most out of life, that is after his retirement from football where we became a great quarterback with many accolades. See I told you it wasn't baseball. He attributes his success in life to having a loving God who taught him how to love as well.

This amazing man has inspired many to help others, which comes from his deep seeded love of the Lord. You certainly can tell he is a Christian by his actions which come from true love. This love story is the movie called, "American Underdog". If you would like to borrow it sometime, I have a copy. It is all about the love of God on earth.

Our command in the Gospel reading this morning is to love one another. "Just as I have loved you, you should love one another." Verse 34. Let's think for a few minutes how exactly has Jesus loved us? How do we know how to love one another? There are many examples in Scripture on how Jesus loved us, so I would like to point out a few this morning.

The first is Leprosy Love. After Jesus finished the Sermon on the Mount, probably his most in-depth and important sermon, he went to visit, to touch, and to cure the most outcast person of his culture, a man with leprosy. I wonder if there are lepers in our lives today?

Second is Leftover Love. Jesus actually did this twice. Jesus fed masses of people and made sure there were leftovers! He did not ask for food stamps, want proof of income or demand anything in fact. He fed them all and said that he will always provide more than we need. Is there anyone starving for love in our lives?

Third is Tough Love. Jesus told the rich man to sell everything he had and give the money to the poor. This would allow the man to follow Jesus without having anything to interfere with his love and devotion. What do we have that stands between us and God?

Fourth is Blind love. Bartimaeus, the blind guy inspires us. He did not leave Jesus alone and kept embarrassing his fellow men by continuing to ask questions of Jesus. Then Jesus called out to Bartimaeus and said, "Go, your faith has made you well.". Do we have people in our lives that embarrasses us?

Unlikely Love is next. Jesus had amazing love for the least of them. Remember little Zacchaeus, who collected taxes for the Roman government with two thugs at his side. He stole money from the treasury, and everyone hated him. Jesus calls him out of the tree and dines with him. How many people in our lives are hard to like?

Look-in-the-mirror Love of Jesus is interesting. We know that many times Jesus had compassion on the lost and lonely. The example of this type of love is when Jesus stands between the adulterous woman and the men that want to stone her and stops it. Who should throw the first rock? How quick are we to judge others but not ourselves?

And at last, the Stinky Feet Love of Jesus. As gross as our feet can get and smell from time to time, they cannot compare to the first century feet that had no socks, no shoes and that walked on rocky soil and dirt floors. No bathtubs or showers then. Jesus washed the feet of the disciples with his own hands. When was the last time we humbly served someone in our lives?

When Jesus said that we should love each other in the same way he loved us, we remember all these times and more that He showed us what real love looks like. It is really a hard message to hear. Jesus meant in all of these ways we should love one another. Leprosy Love, Leftover Love, Tough Love, Blind Love, unlikely Love, Look-in-the-mirror Love, Stinky Feet Love and much, much more.

In fact, the ultimate love of Jesus came with his arms stretched out wide on the cross. Jesus said that he loved us so much that he gave up his life for us. We heard that story a little over four weeks ago on Good Friday. Jesus willingly gave his life for all people of all time. He gave his life for you and for me and even for the people who executed him. We should never forget this selfless act, this amazing act of love.

Today our Christian message is often in conflict. We do not do as we say. You know the old saying that we laugh at. Do as I say and not as I do. Well, Jesus is asking us to love one another as he has loved us. And then he goes on to say that we will be known by how we love one another. "By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another."

But I think it is true that some of us too often forget what true love means. We are shy to even talk about it even to our families.

In a Peanuts strip, Lucy says to Charlie Brown, "You know what I don't understand? I don't understand love!"
 Charlie Brown says, "Who does?"
 Lucy replies, "Explain love to me, Charlie Brown."
 He says, "You can't explain love. I can recommend a book or a poem or a painting, but I can't explain love."
 She says, "Well, try, Charlie Brown, try."
 So, Charlie says, "Well, let's say I see this beautiful, cute little girl walk by."
 Lucy interrupts, "Why does she have to be cute? Huh? Why can't someone fall in love with someone with freckles and a big nose? Explain that!"
 Charlie says, "Well, maybe you are right. Let's say I see this girl walk by with this great big nose. . . "
 Lucy shouts, "I didn't say Great Big Nose."
 Hanging his head, which he often did when he dealt with Lucy, Charlie says, "Not only can you not explain love—you can't even talk about it."

As I was briefly describing the different types of love that Jesus showed, did you hear at the end the questions I asked? They were convicting questions. Ones that should make us squirm a bit. Their purpose was to make us take a good long look at the way we talk about love and how we love one another.

Martin Luther once preached this to his congregation, "As there is no fire without heat and smoke, so there is no faith without love. For when through faith we know how dearly God loves us we must gain a sweet and loving heart towards God, and this heart cannot stay by itself alone. It must flow forth and freely show its gratitude and love. But as God does not need our work and has not commanded us to do anything for Him but to praise and thank Him, the Christian makes haste to give wholehearted towards the neighbor serving and helping the neighbor."

As Lutherans you are all aware of the balance of law and Gospel. And today we live in a world that deeply needs to hear the message of grace. And we have the answer for the world. We are uniquely positioned with a message of God's abundant grace and love. That is right. The most remarkable resource we have is sitting in this room this morning, you, and me. And it is from here that we are sent out into the world to articulate God's love of grace and acceptance to the community who so desperately needs to hear and see it.

And yes, it often times seems so very hard to do. It is easy to love God because of the wonderful things He has done for us. But what about *those* people out there. Easy to love Jesus but hard to love others as He loved us. It is because Jesus did not cut us off as we entered the freeway. He does not take the last parking space. He does not lose the remote or snore. He does not borrow money and never repay it. He doesn't have bad breath and really need a bath. He is not addicted to drugs or alcohol. He is not handicapped. He is not an eyesore sleeping on a bench in Triangle park. He is not drooling or incontinent. In short, Jesus does not annoy us. He does not repulse us. He doesn't intrude on our space.

It is time to reclaim the message of Christ. The Good News. And the Good News is that we have a God who loves us and teaches us through his son, Jesus, to love one another. His message of love is

one that hugs the lepers, feeds strangers, and has leftovers, tells the tough truth, is blind to the opinions of the world, embraces the unlikeable, judges self and not others and humbles itself in servant hood to all. With Jesus "love" is always the operative word. He does not suggest it to us, but commands us to love one another. That is simple enough for even a child to understand. But challenging enough that no mature Christian will claim to have obeyed it fully.

Today we heard the words of Jesus, the urgent words. Jesus was facing his own death, realizing that time was limited and so he was telling his followers, in fact commanding them to do the most important thing: Love one another as I have loved you. To Jesus that meant we are to immerse ourselves in his Word and Sacraments and to let the love he showed us enter our lives and empower us to love, to serve, and to work together.

Folks, our time on this earth is limited. We do not know when it will end. And so, I urge you to let love shape the time you have left here on earth. The message of sharing God's love with others is too important to wait another day. It is urgent.

This is your invitation to let the world know that we are Christ followers, not by our words, or by our bumper stickers or by our jewelry but BY OUR LOVE.

May the greatest love story ever told of God's love in Christ Jesus, show us the way to love one another. AMEN

Christ is Risen! He is risen indeed! Alleluia!