

Deuteronomy 6:1-6  
John 15:1-17  
Communion

Fifth Sunday After Epiphany  
Midway Presbyterian Church  
February 10, 2019

## **An Abiding Love**

### *Introduction to the Old Testament Lesson*

Our Old Testament Lesson today from Deuteronomy contains what is known as the *shema*, meaning “Hear!” or “Listen!”, and has served as a confession of faith for Israel through the centuries. It is referred to in our Gospel Lesson as the “first” of the commandments. Not only are the people to stand in awe and reverence before God and to keep his commandments, but also they are to love God. Israel’s love for God is a response to God’s love for and choosing of Israel. Listen to these words from Deuteronomy 6:1-6...

### *Introduction to the Gospel Lesson*

With the final “I am” saying, our Gospel Lesson begins with the image of the vine and the branches. We then hear that love defines the community’s relationship with one another and with Jesus. Listen to these words from John 15:1-17...

### *Sermon*

How many of you remember the story behind the origin of Valentine’s Day? Some 250 years after Jesus was born in Bethlehem, there was a priest by the name of Valentine. He lived in Rome during the reign of Emperor Claudius, who was committed to rebuilding the once-great Roman army. However, he believed it was important for men to volunteer for armed service, rather than drafting them against their will. But given a choice, most young men in the Roman Empire refused to serve. They’d rather stay at home with their wives and children than go off to battle.

Claudius came to believe that only single men would volunteer for service, so he issued a royal edict that banned all further marriages. He actually outlawed weddings in the Roman Empire, earning the nick-name Claudius the Cruel.

But Valentine thought this was ridiculous! And one of his favorite duties as a priest was to conduct a wedding. So after Emperor Claudius passed his law, the priest secretly continued performing marriage ceremonies. He would whisper the words of the ceremony, while listening for soldiers on the steps outside.

And one night, Valentine did hear footsteps at his door. The couple he was marrying escaped, but he was caught. He was thrown in jail and sentenced to death. Many of the young couples he had married came to visit him in jail. They threw flowers and notes up to his window. They wanted him to know that they, too, believed in love and marriage.

Well, one day, he received a visit from the daughter of one of the prison guards. Her father allowed her to visit him in his cell and they often sat and talked for hours. She believed he did the right thing by continuing to perform weddings. On the day Valentine was to die, he left her a note thanking her for her friendship and loyalty. It was signed, "Love from your Valentine." That note started the custom of exchanging love notes on Valentine's Day. It was written on the day he died, February 14, 269 A.D.—a day that has been set aside in honor of a man who gave his life for God and for love. Now, every year on this day, people speak the name of Saint Valentine, but most importantly, they think about love. (From "A Magnificent Valentine Gift," by Richard Quinn)

However, that love has to do with cupid, and romance, and dating, and marriage—all well and good. But, of course, the love that Jesus was talking about was a different kind of love. It had to do with the reason he had come into the world, his life and death. It had to do with a love that sought to nurture the well-being of others.

In the chapter preceding our Gospel Lesson for today, Jesus begins to talk about love in verse 28, saying,

“You heard me say to you, ‘I am going away, and I am coming to you.’ If you loved me, you would rejoice that I am going to the Father, because the Father is greater than I.”

This does not imply that the disciples did not love Jesus, but that their love was held captive to their fears, and principally to their fear of losing his presence. And here the Spirit seeks to reorient their love. Real love toward Jesus is not the desire to possess but the faithful love that expresses itself in obedience to his commandments. Foremost among his commandments is that the disciples love one another with the same love they had known from him.

We want to be loved and we want to give love. The problem is, our love is lacking, just as we are lacking. It’s often conditional upon our own mood or someone’s actions, appearance or attitude. When it comes to Jesus’ love, all of us fall a little short.

So, how do we develop and nurture a love worth giving on Valentine’s Day and every day? The answer, I believe, is found in our lesson from the Gospel of John. Let’s hear again what Jesus has to say:

“I have loved you even as the Father has loved me. Remain in my love. When you obey my commandments, you remain in my love, just as I obey my Father’s commandments and remain in his love. I have told you these things so that you will be filled with my joy. Yes, your joy will overflow! This is my commandment: Love each other in the same way I have loved you. There is no greater love than to lay down one’s life for one’s friends. You are my friends if you do what I command... This is my command: Love each other.” (John 15:9-17 NLT)

Jesus had a lot to say about love, and his final night with his followers was no exception. During the course of the evening (which began in John 13 and carries on through chapter 17), Jesus uses the word *love* no less than thirty times in eighteen different verses. Over and over we hear that Greek word *agape*. It’s that love that holds a marriage together, and a family together,

and a church together. It's that love that helps people to forgive one another, to respect one another, and to serve one another. What the world needs now is the love of Jesus. Clearly, love meant a lot to Jesus; it was his central message to his disciples. Through his love we do not seek to possess others, but we seek that which will bless them. From this brief excerpt that evening, Jesus reveals for us how to obtain a love worth giving. It all begins when we receive his love for us!

Jesus says that if we keep his commandment we will abide in his love. And his primary commandment is to love one another, as he has loved us. Jesus teaches these things in order that his joy may be in us, and our joy may be complete. It is this gift of the *agape* love of Jesus that abides. Paul spoke of it in that First Letter to the Church in Corinth. He said that faith, hope, and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love." (13:13) Jesus invites us to an abiding love of him, a love that is committed and sure. The Spirit brings back the love of Christ and directs it through his disciples not only to one another but in ever widening circles to others through bearing the fruits of the Spirit.

Then Jesus speaks to us of his *destination*. He is going back to the Father. A true love for him, Jesus says, will bring gladness in spite of sorrow over his loss. He was being released from the sufferings he underwent in this world. His work would be complete. He was being restored to his glory.

When we truly grasp the truth of the Christian faith, in a similar way we can find a real joy for those who die and go to be with God. That is not to say that all sorrow and loneliness will be removed. But it is to say that even in our sorrow and loss, we can be glad for those who go on to that home in heaven that God has prepared for them. "A house not made with hands, but eternal in the heavens." (2 Cor. 5:1b) They enter into blessedness. Not a dark abode of

death. But life in a holy city where they shall need no light of lamp or sun, for the Lord God will be their light. (Rev. 22:15)

When we come to those last events in the life of Jesus, we find the institution of Holy Communion, and then the Garden of Gethsemane. Jesus wanted and needed the close presence of his comrades in his hour of deepest need.

And so do we. A “solitary” Christian, someone said, is a contradiction in terms (an oxymoron). The pilgrimage of faith was never meant to be a lonely journey for any of us. Although we must face our own problems and make our own decisions, we have a ministry to one another. Of this we are reminded every time we celebrate the Sacrament of Holy Communion. Our faith was not meant to be locked up inside us but to be shared, even as we share the bread and the cup.

As the Hebrews celebrated the release of their people from bondage in Egypt at the Passover, so do Christians celebrate his living and dying and resurrection age after age, until he comes again. We celebrate his victory over sin, fear, and guilt. Jesus gave the disciples the cup and the bread in order that these elements might become for them a symbol of a new covenant, a covenant based on love and grace. It would reorient their love for him and for one another.

Every time the bread is broken and the cup is shared, it is to be for us a renewal of Christ’s new covenant of love and mercy that continues to exist between Christ and his people, among his people, and reaches out to others in fruitful ways.

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.