

John 15:9-17
A sermon preached by Carla Pratt Keyes
A Sermon for Every Sunday

I have to say, I think it's fun when themes of love and abiding show up in our lectionary close to Mother's Day. It's like ... getting a greeting card from God! Because these are the things we celebrate at Mother's Day (or Father's Day). Things like love and home-making and family. And ... rules! "*If you're going to live in my love, you have to follow my rules!*" Jesus basically says in the gospel according to John. That sounds like something my parents used to say. Or ... "*Love one another. Abide in my love.*" Those are sayings you might cross-stitch onto a sampler. I can see them framed and hanging in the kitchen.

Today's passage from John addresses the blessings and challenges of love, much like the greeting cards do. I read a bunch of cards at Target this week in preparation for Mother's Day next week, and the cards seemed to fall into two basic categories: beautiful cards thanking mothers for their steadfast love and patience ... and humorous cards acknowledging the challenges of parenting – the sleepless nights, daily chores, and sibling arguments that drive moms crazy. In homes, as in churches, love is as complicated as it is important.

In the gospels, Jesus tells his followers to love God, themselves, their neighbors, their enemies, and one another. Mutual love exercised within the Christian community (the *Christian family*) – it's especially important in the gospel according to John. In her book on "*Living into Community*," professor of Christian social ethics Christine Pohl shows how. She underlines the way that Jesus risks nothing less than his reputation and the credibility of his story by tying them to how his followers would live and care for one another. In today's text from John, Jesus claims his followers as his friends. These are the people Jesus has chosen to continue his ministry, after he's physically left them. Later in John, Jesus prays that his friends will be *one* with all who've come before and all who follow them – *one* with all who believe in him – "*so that the world may know God's love in Christ.*" Jesus explicitly links the truth of his life and message to the church's life together. He expects that our relationship with each other will be characterized by love like his – and that our love will make God known to the world.

It was maybe not his best move.

Today's newspapers and history books *both* reveal a church much-fractured by sin, corruption, and an absence of love. Too often the church bears testimony to conflict more than Christ. I got to remembering a blog post Rachel Held-Evans wrote about this. She was responding to a law North Carolina had passed that discriminated against the lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender community. Held-Evans' blog was called "How to Win a Culture War and Lose a Generation." She noted how some Christians were celebrating the new law, others were mourning, and many, many more were simply lost to the Church. "*My generation is tired of the culture wars,*" she said. "We are tired of fighting,

tired of vain efforts to advance the Kingdom through politics and power, tired of drawing lines in the sand, tired of being known for what we are against, not what we are for. Regardless of whether you identify most with Side A or Side B, (or with one of the many variations within those two broad categories), it should be clear [she said] that amendments like these needlessly offend gays and lesbians, damage the reputation of Christians, and further alienate [young adults from the Church] Young Christians are ready for peace [Held-Evans said]. We are ready to lay down our arms. *We are ready to start washing feet instead of waging war.* And if we cannot find that sort of peace within the Church, I fear we will look for it elsewhere.”

Let's start washing feet instead of waging war. It's a saying I might hang in the kitchen.

Jesus calls his followers to acts of love. Acts of service. Acts of humility. If you want to be my friend, he says ... if you want to live within the shelter of my love ... if you want to align your interests with mine, you need to do this. Lay down your arms, if not your life. Start serving each other. Love one another, *as I have loved you*, Christ said and still says. Yet, too often, this is not our inclination!

The Poet Scott Cairns wrote a poem called “Possible Answers to Prayer,” and I love it for its humorous look at the interior life of a believer. In the poem, God is addressing a person praying. It needn't be a Christian to whom God speaks But it's easy to imagine Jesus as the speaker here – Jesus, addressing one of his less mature disciples, saying:

Your petitions—though they continue to bear
just the one signature—have been duly recorded.

Your anxieties—despite their constant,
relatively narrow scope and inadvertent
entertainment value—nonetheless serve
to bring your person vividly to mind.

Your repentance—all but obscured beneath
a burgeoning, yellow fog of frankly more
conspicuous resentment—is sufficient.

Your intermittent concern—for the sick,
the suffering, the needy poor is sometimes
recognizable to me, if not to them.

Your angers, your zeal, your lipsmackingly
righteous indignation toward the many
whose habits and sympathies offend you—

These must burn away before you'll apprehend
how near I am, with what fervor I adore

precisely these, the several who rouse your passions.

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How near God is, and with what fervor God adores precisely the people who rouse our passions. How dearly God loves the very folks who make us crazy. This we do well to remember as we attempt to follow Jesus.

Even more, I think, we must remember with what fervor God adores us – how dearly God loves you and me, though we make God weary with our anxious prayers ... though we exasperate God with our half-hearted obedience ... though we care too intermittently for others, and too much about ourselves. God adores us ... enough to be patient with us, enough to want what's *good* for us. Of course, what's good for us is love.

What's good for us is love.

I read recently about the way a deep understanding of God's love and grace transformed a small Christian community in Mississippi. This group of folks called the "Antioch Community" had been trying to live out racial reconciliation, and it had been hard for them. They'd reached a crisis in their life together. During that period of crisis, a wise friend told them: You don't grow into God's love by making demands of each other. "You do it by giving each other grace." Grace, he said, involves acting with love when it doesn't seem fair, or reasonable, and "when others are being complete jerks." ... It's hard, he said, because we can't stand the idea of not *fixing* each other. "But insofar as we *can* fix people at all, we can do it only by forgiving them, [giving them grace, and leaving them to God – who loves them like a Mother and Father. Grace assumes sin, he said. Within any family or community, grace assumes insensitivity, occasional stupidity, rudeness and arguments. The goal is not to ignore those things, he said. When Christ asks us to accept each other, he isn't asking us to ignore the hurts between us.] People of grace speak truth. But in an atmosphere of grace, truth seems less offensive and more important ... [The key is] to get the love of God into your bones and to live as if you are forgiven. It is enough to care for each other, to forgive each other, and to wash the dishes."

It's enough – to care for each other, to forgive each other, and to wash the dishes. Again, not a bad saying to hang in the kitchen.

For any community (for any family) love is the thing – it's what's at the center ... what's most essential. And on any day of the year, it is worth remembering how love – for all its challenges and complications – is what will bring us joy. There's a line in Marilynne Robinson's novel "*Gilead*" ... it's something a dying father writes to his son, but the same sentiment could be expressed by a child to a parent, a friend to a friend, a church member to another member of the church. This person writes to another, "If you ever wonder what you've done in your life, and everyone does wonder sooner or later, you have been God's grace to me, a miracle, something more than a miracle."

This is part of what God has given us – the opportunity and ability to bear God's love and

grace to each other – even to *be* God’s love and grace for each other. It’s a huge responsibility and a gift and, yes, something of a miracle every time it happens.

—*Carla Pratt Keyes* © 2018