

“Jimmy, I love You”

A Sermon for Every Sunday, Pentecost 2B

1 Samuel 3:1-10; Psalm 139:1-6, 13-18; Mark 2:23-3:6

“Jimmy, I love you.”

Wilma was sitting by the bed of her husband, Jimmy. The progression of his illness had reached its last phase. But Wilma, who had been married to Jimmy for over 4 decades, just sat by his bed, repeating what she had so often said: “Jimmy, I love you.”

They first fell in love in high school. And after Jimmy served in the Army, they were married. A young couple, starting life together at the start of the 1960’s.

They set about creating a life together. Jimmy worked in a local factory, Wilma added inexpensive touches to their little apartment. They started to learn each other’s habits, adjusting to married life. They were young, and in love.

Love had something new in store for them. The doctor announced that a child would soon arrive. So Jimmy and Wilma set up the nursery, and wondered how the arrival of a child would change their lives. They would learn new things about love.

Jimmy and Wilma made all of the mistakes that first-time parents make. But eventually, with their son, a new routine settled in. The three of them, loving each other. It looked like this would be their future.

But then another surprise. The doctor announced that another child was coming. They would learn new things about love again

Their daughter was born. Now there were four in the house. Two years later, *another* daughter was born. Life was not like it was before. They were learning new things about parenting, and love.

The girls reached high school. This family had reached its stride. Then came the day when Jimmy went to the doctor. The diagnosis came: he had multiple sclerosis.

Their lives changed forever. Wilma became the bread winner. Things changed for the children, as they watched their father’s health decline. They began to learn that love was requiring something new from them. Now, love required letting go of what used to be, and learning the new skills of encouragement, patience, caregiving.

For the next two decades, Wilma took care of Jimmy. It was certainly NOT what she had envisioned on her wedding day. You don’t anticipate such things when you are young and in love. But here she

was, the full-time bread winner, full-time care giver. And what did she say about all of this? She simply said, “I will do whatever it takes to love him.”

Until the day he died, she stayed by his side, tenderly saying, “Jimmy, I love you.”

When couples stand before the altar and say “I do,” they often think that they know what love will require in their lives. But, over time, we begin to learn that our understanding of love must evolve, grow, deepen. Life requires that we let go of what we thought love means, so that we can embrace the truth of love more generously. With time, we learn that love is about sacrifice and selflessness.

And just as people begin to wrap their heads and hearts around the reality of their vocation... the first child comes along. Now there’s a new vocation – parenthood! And, all over again, we learn that love requires a lifetime of sacrifice, and selflessness.

Frankly that’s true of every vocation and calling in life – whether it’s marriage, parenthood, friendship, ministry, just following Jesus. We THINK we know what we’re getting into when we first say ‘yes’ – then life teaches us that we often have to let go of what we thought we knew, in order to embrace the God-given vocation of love.

In the First Book of Samuel, we see that Young Samuel literally has a vocation, a calling. Asleep near the Ark of the Covenant, he hears a voice: “Samuel. Samuel.” Since he is young and inexperienced in spiritual things, he assumes that old Eli is calling him.

As this pattern is repeated through night, young Samuel grows confused... and maybe just a little tired from all this interrupted sleep!

But Eli had learned a thing or two about God over the years. So Eli, the seasoned mentor, helps Samuel figure out what is going on. “You’re being called by the Lord, Samuel! (the word ‘vocation’ means ‘calling’). So when you hear the voice again, say, “Speak Lord, your servant is listening.”

This is the beginning of Samuel’s vocation, the start of his life-long love of God.

Samuel says, “Speak Lord,” and the Lord does! And whatever initial excitement Samuel may have felt over this loving encounter with God may have quickly given way to Samuel asking himself, “What did I just sign up for?”

Because, when the Lord speaks to young Samuel, the Lord asks Samuel to deliver a hard and discomfiting message to... Old Eli! God has a word of judgment for Eli and his disobedient family.

Samuel quickly learned that loving THIS God, listening to THIS God, was not going to be easy.

This was a truth that Samuel would encounter again and again. Yes, Samuel loved the Lord, and the Lord loved him... but love required that Samuel had to let go of any hope of being the popular, beloved prophet of God. Again and again, Samuel had to announce a word of challenge and

warning to the people of Israel. Loving the Lord required sacrifice from Samuel. Samuel had to let go, in order to love the Lord more faithfully.

The Pharisees often get a bad rap from Christian preachers. In past sermons, I myself have painted the Pharisees with a very broad brush. We observe their careful attention to the Law, and we criticize them for being 'legalistic.'

As we read today's Gospel passage, we might shake our heads and ask, "How can they complain that Jesus and his disciples are plucking and eating a little grain? How can they complain about Jesus healing a man's hand on the Sabbath?"

But let's not judge the Pharisees just yet. After all, they were trying their best to love God. They had a vocation, a calling – to love the Lord their God with all their heart, mind and strength.

Since they wanted to love and serve God faithfully, they read what we call the Old Testament. There, they found instructions from God himself. There, they read that faithfulness to their calling could be expressed by carefully following the statutes and commands of God. God gave the commandments, to show us what life can look like as we live the covenant.

So... the Pharisees loved God. And they understood that loving God required our careful observance of the law.

Then along comes Jesus. He and his followers were causing quite a commotion. Yes, Jesus, spoke of the love of our God.

But there was something new about his teaching. When Jesus talked about the love of God, he touched people's hearts and minds. Even the Pharisees listened and were intrigued.

But as they WATCHED Jesus, they realized – Jesus's understanding of the love of God was different than what the Pharisees understood. If they were going to embrace Jesus' teaching, they would have to CHANGE. They may even have to let go of some things they thought they knew about God, and about loving God.

Jesus constantly revealed a deeper truth about who God is, and what the love of God means. As Jesus and his hungry disciples walked through the field of grain, maybe Jesus was revealing that God loves his children in such a way that he does not want our bellies to be empty. But to understand the love of God in that way, might mean that the Pharisees would have to let go of certain ideas about the Sabbath.

As Jesus healed in the synagogue, he was revealing a deeper truth about what the love of God means. By healing on the Sabbath day, maybe Jesus was showing us that, in God's mind, every day is a day to heal, every day is a day for us to do what is right and good. After all, isn't God glorified when the suffering of one of God's children is alleviated?

Again and again, Jesus says, “I have not come to abolish the law, I’ve come to *fulfill* it.” Perhaps Jesus is inviting God’s people to the next step in their vocation, to the next lesson in what love requires. Going deeper into the mystery of love always seems to require sacrifice, always seems to require that we be willing to let go of what we thought we knew, so that we can embrace a more Christ-like love.

Throughout the Gospels, some folks seem to ‘get it.’ When we first start loving the Lord and living our vocation, we think we knew what love means. Then Jesus takes us deeper, shows us more, asks us to let go of what we thought we knew, to see the truth more clearly.

Some embrace that vocation, and are blessed. Some resist, trying to hold on to what they thought was the only way of being faithful, and loving.

Through the gift of the Spirit, you and I have a calling and vocation. Isn’t it wonderful to be called by Jesus? Isn’t it wonderful to have friends and mentors who can help us listen to the Lord? And, as we follow the Lord, he always wants to show us more, and take us deeper, and expand our vision.

If we are paying attention, our understanding of loving the Lord is different now than when we first started.

That growth in understanding often comes when the Lord asks us to let go of what we thought we knew, in order to be surprised by his spirit. Loving him sometimes requires the hard task of letting go of some practices, certainties, convictions, and attitudes which, for a time in our lives, defined divine love for us.

There is always something new to learn about love. Wilma discovered that, in her life-long vocation of love with Jimmy. Samuel discovered that, in his life-long vocation as a prophet. If we pay close attention to the words and deeds of Jesus, we will discover that he is constantly calling us change and grow. Trust him, even when the letting-go is hard. Say: “Speak lord, your servant is listening.” Say to him, “Jesus, I love you, so teach me something new about what love means.