

Bold in Love

Sermon 99 | Greystone Baptist Church | May 9, 2021

John 15:7-17

I love you. Je t'aime. Te quiero.

I'm crazy about you. I don't want to live without you. You take my breath away. You're my better half. I'm here for you. Whatever you need, just ask. I will go with you.

There are a million ways to say, "I love you."

And there are a million sermons on love. Some that focus on 1 Corinthians 13, also known as "the love chapter." Others that draw distinction upon the different Greek words for love.

Eros: romantic love

Philia: the love of friendship

Ludus: playful love

Pragma: longstanding love

Philautia: love of the self

and of course, Agape: love for everyone

In many ways, writing, preaching, and hearing a sermon on love makes us want to say: okay, okay, okay, we get it! We hear you! We get the point, can we just move on to something else?

At this point in John's Gospel, this is precisely what readers might be tempted to think. By the time we get to chapter 15, where today's reading picks up, Jesus has already summarized the commandments with one word: *love* and he continues to call his disciples to go and do it. It is not the first time in this section of the Gospel that Jesus calls the disciples to *love*, rather it is a theme that is repeated over and over and over again. And here it is explained rather plainly: *Just as God has loved me, I have loved you... abide*

in this love. He goes on: This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends. ...I am giving you these commands so that you might love one another.

Seems pretty clear to me.

Most scholars believe that John's Gospel was written later than the other Gospels. They say it was probably composed around 90 or 100 Common Era. Even though it was written later, Christ-followers have had approximately 1921 years to read, interpret, and apply this text to their lives. In that time, we have embedded ourselves with political powers from the ancient Roman empire to the modern Republican and Democratic parties. We have allowed our name and our sacred texts to be used to oppress, marginalize, dehumanize, and belittle people who are not like "us" and that "us" has shifted over time in order to suit the powers that be. We have waged war against Muslims. We have put on trial women accused of witchcraft. We have called scientists heretics and gay people abominations. We have engaged in practices of colonization that led to genocide for all kinds of indigenous peoples. We have turned a blind eye to discrimination, death, and violence unfolding around the world. We have created systems of slavery and racism the likes of which the world had never seen before. We have defended these evils with scripture. We have doubled down on these positions when calls to accountability have come... and we have refused to accept the truth about our past because it is too painful... or perhaps too shameful to bear.

Yes, the tension between our call to love and our history of hate can be difficult to reconcile.

Perhaps we, like the disciples in John's Gospel, have been slow to pick up on what Jesus is actually saying when he says, "love one another." You see, up to this point in the Gospel, Jesus has been dropping little hints by talking about his own calling to lay down his life as an act of love. Like a good shepherd he will lay down his life for the sheep. It is a narrative detail realized in the symbolic act of foot washing. Perhaps the disciples thought that was the extent of it. But now, Jesus has gotten a lot more clear with his words.

I no longer call you servants but friends, because you know as much as I do. You are my friends now and we share the same destiny of self-sacrificing love. A friend lays down one's life for the sake of the other. This is what love looks like in action.

Love is not merely words or gestures of affection. Love is not general kindness when the opportunity arises.¹ Love is standing with others – all others – when they are down, when they are oppressed, when they are lonely, when they are outcast, when every other door seems to be slammed in their face, when no other home is willing to welcome them in, Love says, "come in, beloved, you are welcome here."

Love means standing with others, and putting their needs first, even when it comes at great personal cost.

Rabbi Ariel Berger tells a story about a young boy named Mason. Mason had travelled to Poland with a group of students from his school. While in Poland, the students toured some of the centers of Jewish life before the second World War. They also toured the sites of concentration camps. One day, about half way through the trip, Mason disappeared with one of the program counselors. He wouldn't tell anyone where he was going and when he got back, he

¹ Wes Howard-Brook, *Becoming Children of God*. 336

wouldn't tell anyone where he'd been. Except one boy, Rabbi Berger's son, who was Mason's dear friend. As Mason began to recount the events of his day he told the following story:

My grandparents were survivors. They were married three weeks before the deportation to Auschwitz. In Auschwitz they were separated, obviously, and they would go every evening to the fence separating the men's and the women's sides of the camps. His grandfather would bring a crust of bread or an extra potato to give to his bride. If he had nothing, he would go just to see her.

Until my grandmother, Mason continued, was transferred to a rabbit farm on the outskirts of Auschwitz. The Nazis were doing experiments on rabbits that had to do with finding a cure for typhus. And the rabbit farm was run by a Polish man who noticed that the rabbits were getting better food, attention, and care than the Jewish slave laborers and inmates.

Then, my grandmother cut her arm on a piece of barbed wire, and the cut became infected. And it wasn't a serious infection if you had antibiotics. But of course, if you were a Jew in that place, in that time, there was no way you were going to get antibiotics.

So what did the Polish man who was running the rabbit farm do? He cut his own arm open, and he placed his wound on her wound so that he would get the infection that she had, and he became infected.

And he went to the Nazis and he said, "I am one of your best managers. This rabbit farm is very productive. If I die, you're gonna lose a lot of productivity. I need medicine."

They gave him medicine, and he shared it with her.

And he saved her life.

So where was I when I left the other day? I went to see that Polish man. He is still alive and living on the outskirts of Warsaw, and I went to say thank you for my life. Thank you for my life.²

No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends. (v.13)

That is what the bold love of God looks like in action.

It is a shame so much of our collective history tells a different story about who we, the body of Christ, are in action. In this case, many, many Christians stood by as Jews were taken from their homes and placed in camps like Auschwitz. It is heart breaking how pseudo-Christian ideologies were used to support and reinforce the dehumanization, the death, and destruction brought about under the Nazi regime.

Thanks be to God for brave individuals who were overcome with courage and emboldened with *Love*, love that led them down a path of self-sacrificing action, self-sacrificing advocacy, self-sacrificing solidarity with those who were the victims of history's most horrifying events.

The truth is, as shameful as the story of our past may be, there have always been brave individuals who persist in finding ways to show the same kind of love that the Polish rabbit farm manager showed Mason's grandmother in Rabbi Berger's story.

² <https://onbeing.org/programs/ariel-burger-be-a-blessing/> retrieved May 7, 2021

So how do we reclaim the narrative? How do we change our historical legacy to be one not of hatred, violence, and exclusion but one of bold and self-sacrificing love?

How can we become not a body of this world but the body of Christ that is bold in love *in* this world?

Maybe it starts with that word, *friend*.

You are my friends if you do what I command you. I do not call you servants any longer, because the servant does not know what the master is doing; but I have called you friends, because I have made known to you everything that I have heard from my Father.

...love one another...

...there is no greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends...

Jesus is making it very plain here. If the Gospel of John was a sermon, then this is the call... if it were a song, this is the refrain... *Love*. And let that love be so bold that it is utterly selfless... selfless enough to lead all the way to a street corner, a halfway house, a welcome house, your own house, a jail house, a grocery store line, a parking lot, a restaurant, a border, a board room, a war room, a courtroom, or even a cross.

Let us be bold in love! And let us boldly tell the stories of that love so that the Body of Christ might take on a new reputation, a new place in history, a new identity in our community, one that resonates more fully with the Christ we claim to follow.

The one who showed us how to tend the sheep, how to wash the feet, and how to lay down our very lives for the sake of our friends.

Amen.