

“Witness to Love”

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Texts: Acts 17: 22-31 and John 14: 15-21

At the end of the reading last week, Jesus commands us to love one another. This week, Jesus begins with telling us to keep his commandments. Doesn't take a rocket scientist to figure out exactly what he is saying...love one another. I know, it's easier said than done. People can be annoying and frustrating, hurtful, and hateful. It would have been easier if Jesus had just said, “tolerate one another.” Truth is, we're not good at that, even, but Jesus has this knack for challenging us to be who we were created to be. We were created in the image of the one who is ultimate love: God. Whether we like it or not, whether we're good at it or not, we are love and we were created to love. Further, loving leads to happiness. In the words of Richard Rohr, who provided much that goes into this sermon, “it is not a decision, but who you are.” And yet, it is a decision to live out of the love we were created to be. Our greatest witness to our faith tradition in Jesus Christ is our ability and our willingness to love.

No, I don't mean we're called to love like a Hallmark movie. That love isn't bad love, but it's not enough. That kind of love is often superficial, easy to lose, and it requires something different than what I'm talking about this morning. You see; love isn't something we decide to do now and then if others behave. It is not conditional, circumstantial, or contingent on anything other than who God is. God is completely and totally unconditional love. Even that gets screwed up when we decide that this means never gets angry, or that

God enables bad behavior, or that God tolerates hate and hurt. It's hard to explain, but love is not what we do, but the energy we do it with. To be "in love" is to be standing in a different place. It's caring for people around you. It's not even what you do, but how you do it. All of us can tell right away if someone is doing something out of love, or for some other reason.

Further, love is a stance. It's how we look at the whole of the world and everyone in it. It's not rose-colored or Pollyanna, but it is from the depths of our souls the way we look at things. We actually hurt when someone is consistently a jerk, not because they have hurt us directly, but because it's obvious that they are not living in love. They spew hate. They thrive on hurting others. They live only for themselves. And ironically, if we're living in love we hurt because we know that the problem is that there is no love in their hearts. I'm not even sure if such people have love for themselves. As Christian people, we cannot help but feel sorry for, and hurt for, those who are so hurtful to others. We know that deep down inside they have no love for themselves, and do not see themselves as the image of God, despite their claims to the contrary. That doesn't mean that we excuse or enable their behavior, but we can still hurt for them as well as for ourselves when we see what is left in their loveless wake. All of that is true.

Week after week, however, I tell you that we are called to do what is ours to do. I grow of tired of saying it sometimes, but it comes from the right place as it is a constant reminder that the world wants to see us as helpless and hopeless because many in the world feel the same way – and many of them occupy places of power. They spend their whole lives trying to look good, when on the inside they don't feel much good or much love at all.

“Love, like forgiveness, is a decision,” says Father Rohr. It’s a decision in our minds and in our hearts. And we’d better make it early in the day, because once we’re a few hours into low-level resentment, anger, or disappointment, it’s too late. He continues, “When we’re not choosing love, we’ll use any excuse to be unhappy or irritated. We’re already unhappy, and then something gives us an excuse to externalize it.” I would add that this has become a national obsession. Just waiting for the next thing to be angry about. It shows up in our health, in our group settings, and even in our families. It certainly preoccupies the national agenda. Everything is something to be angry about and woe to the person to has any reason to be happy. Then we medicate ourselves to keep from dropping into complete despair. Medications and interventions can be necessary – no doubt—but at the same time, we have some ability to make a decision to love in an often loveless world. That is why Richard calls us to “recognize ahead of time when we are not living in love.” Unhappiness just needs an object—as do happiness and love. This is where we have choice.

But in order to love another we must first realize that it all begins with God’s love for all of humanity, but most importantly, God’s love for each of us. Archbishop Desmond Tutu reminds us in his book *God Has a Dream* that, “before you can love your neighbor—your brother or sister—as yourself, you must first love yourself. And to first love yourself, you must know that God loves you now and loves you always.” I am absolutely convinced that the most hateful people in the world are those who never got this first point. They are so busy proving how great they are, that they forget that greatness and achievements are not how God’s love works. It’s the other way around. We first know that we are loved and then

out of that love we do great things for others because we realize that love is best when it is lived.

“Authentic love,” writes Father Rohr, “is of one piece. How we love anything is how we love everything...So often, we think this means to love our neighbor with the same amount of love—*as much as* we love ourselves—when it really means that it is the same Source and the same Love that allows us to love ourselves, others, and God *at the same time!* That is unfortunately not the way most people understand love, compassion, and forgiveness—yet it is the only way they ever work.”

Moreover, there is a straight line between love and suffering. Those who love the most often suffer the most. Jesus being the greatest example. That doesn't mean that we seek out suffering, but it will find us when we decide that we are going to live as people of love. There will be that person that you can lead to water, and even hold their head under, yet they say they are thirsty because they refuse to drink. There will be the addict whom you cannot save despite your best efforts. Sometimes the most loving action is not to take an action, but to decide that this is how I will love. To the best of my knowledge, the most loving action I can take is to take no action. You might be wrong, or you might be right, but most importantly, the decision comes from the decision you made earlier that said you will love. “Until we love and until we suffer, we all try to figure out life and death with our minds. Then a Larger Source opens up within us and we ‘think’ and feel quite differently through ‘knowing the Love, which is beyond all knowledge (Ephesians 3:19)...Authentic love (which is always more than an emotion) initially opens the door of awareness and aliveness, and

then *suffering for that love* keeps that door open for mind, body, and will to enter. [For] most of us that is the work of a lifetime.”

These last three weeks, we have spoken about witness. First, we spoke about witnessing who we are as a community to the world around us. Second, we spoke last week about enduring in witness despite the blowback that often comes from not being “the norm” when it comes to contemporary Christians. This week, we culminate this short series by realizing that all of this comes from the Source of all that is: God in Jesus Christ. Jesus promised to love us and called on us to love one another. Jesus then reminded us that there is plenty of room for all of the world in the mansion that is to come. He reminded us that when we pray “Thy kingdom come” it’s much more than a happy place after we die. We pray each week that love will rule the day. We pray every time we pray that prayer that love will be the source of all that is.

And yet, to make that prayer reality takes more than hoping God strikes the world with lightning and makes us all good. No, the prayer is a reminder to us to love just a little bit more until we come to that place that we become the people God created us to be. We cannot control what someone else does, or how loving they are, or whether or not they are hurting and simply passing their hurt onto others. Yet we can decide for ourselves, for today, for right now, that we will approach the day and the world with love.

The author bell hooks (sic), reminds us that “culturally, all spheres of American life—politics, religion, the workplace, domestic households, intimate relations—should and could have as their foundation a love ethic. The underlying values of a culture and its

ethics shape and inform the way we speak and act. A love ethic presupposes that everyone has the right to be free, to live fully and well...Individuals who choose to love can and do alter our lives in ways that honor the primacy of a love ethic. We do this by choosing to work with individuals we admire and respect; by committing to give our all to relationships; by embracing a global vision wherein we see our lives and our fate and intimately connected to those of everyone else on the planet.” I think you’ll agree that the world has a long way to go in making the love ethic who we are. Can’t fix that on our own. But what if somebody—anybody—chose to live by that love ethic? What if we did? It comes down to whether or not we think our actions have implications. bell hooks continues:

Commitment to a love either transforms our lives by offering us a different set of values to live by. In large and small ways, we make choices based on a belief that honesty, openness, and personal integrity need to be expressed in public and private decisions...Living by a love ethic we learn to value loyalty and a commitment to sustained bonds over material advancement. While careers and making money remain important agendas, they never take precedence over valuing and nurturing human life and well-being.

Embracing a love ethic means that we utilize all dimensions of love—“care, commitment, trust, responsibility, respect, and knowledge”—in our everyday lives. We do this only by cultivating awareness. Being aware enables us to critically examine our actions to see what is needed to that we can give care, be responsible, show respect and indicate a willingness to learn.

Truth is, this is all God is asking for. We are asked to choose to love even though it’s hard, and even though the answers are not easy. However, true happiness comes not from “getting what is ours” but from redeeming what is God’s. And everything in the world, including you and me and that jerk down the street are God’s. And God has chosen to love us. God asks us to choose to love one another.

As we're witnessing—let us witness to God's love. May we love just a little bit more and may we realize that our love may be rare, but it's the only thing that profoundly changes the world. May we find happiness knowing that we are part of the solution to a world caught up in hate. There is another way to live. Whether it's easier or harder than the "normal" way, I'm not sure. But I know this, love has done far more for the world than hate could ever imagine.

Imagine a world—a kindom—where love reigns. Live like it's true! Amen.