

# Let Us Love One Another

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There is perhaps nothing more central to Christian discipleship than the commandment to love. Love God. Love one another. Love God by loving one another.

When the religious leaders asked Jesus – “Which is the great commandment?” “Which commandment is the first of all?” – Jesus responded with familiar words from the Torah, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength.” And then he added, “The second is this, You shall love your neighbor as yourself.”

In the words of today’s reading from I John, “Beloved, let us love one another ....Those who love God must love their brothers and sisters also.”

The context for this commandment to love one another is always the same: It is because of God’s love for us that we are called to love one another. The Bible is the story of God’s steadfast – everlasting – love for us, from the covenant made with Israel to the Word made flesh in Jesus Christ.

Again, in the words of today’s lesson, “God’s love was revealed among us in this way: God sent God’s only Son into the world so that we might live through him. In this is love, not that we loved God but that God loved us....Beloved, since God loved us so much, we also ought to love one another....We love because God first loved us....If we love one another, God lives in us.”

I realize I’m not telling you anything you don’t know, I’m simply affirming the importance of what you do know: We are called to love one another.

There are countless sermons that could be given – and countless others that have been given – about what it means to love others. Calls for justice for people who are oppressed; appeals to show charity toward people in need; pleas for peace and reconciliation with people whom we label our enemies; challenges to accept people whom we have shunned for whatever reason; petitions that we might forgive our debtors – people who have sinned against us....all of these are about loving others.

But in this sermon today I want to focus on something different, a message closer to home...what it means to love one another within this church family, what it means for us as a community to love...and to abide in God’s love.

At the risk of oversimplifying (and that’s a risk in any sermon), I want to suggest that loving one another in a church community means at least these 3 things: (1) we know each other; (2) we value each other; and (3) we care for each other.

**WE KNOW EACH OTHER.** Wow. That sounds pretty obvious, doesn’t it? As they used to say...NOT. In a church of this size, it’s not obvious or automatic. It doesn’t just happen that we know each other. It takes intentionality and effort.

It starts when we gather as a community to worship. It's important that we wear our name tags. Now I've been told that there are some people who complain or even refuse, saying, "I don't need to wear a name tag. Everybody knows who I am." That's probably not true. I'm embarrassed, but honest enough to confess that I've been here for over 10 years, and I don't know everyone by name. I also don't expect that everyone knows me. I need to wear my name tag for others, and I need others to wear their name tags for me.

I'm a member of the membership committee. Last year we introduced a new "welcome pad." We thought a lot about the meaning and purpose of doing so. We have two goals: One is to identify visitors to our church so that we can welcome them. The other – equally important – goal is to help all of us, long-time members, new members and visitors, get to know each other. Worship is not a show that we come to watch, where we don't care who is sitting next to us. Worship is an act of coming together as a church family to give praise and glory to God, and to be equipped to serve God in the world. As indicated on the welcome pad, we want – or at least we should want – to know the people with whom we are worshipping. I've heard that some people resist signing their names because they think we're taking attendance or something. That's not what it's for or how it's used. What we want is for you to read the names of those sitting with you, to speak with them by name, to pray for them, and symbolically for you and for them to offer yourselves to God in worship by placing the list of names in the offering plate.

Of course, knowing one another goes far beyond knowing names. After worship, we gather for fellowship, whether in the Dickinson Room or Westminster Hall. This should be an opportunity to get to know each other better – not just to speak to our long-time friends, but to get to know newer members and visitors. We also get to know one another better by spending time together: by teaching and learning from each other in church school classes and confirmation and adult education; by working side-by-side as elders and deacons and committee members – deliberating, praying, serving food, sponsoring refugees, building houses; by gathering in small fellowship groups – for youth, women, and now for men. It takes intentionality and effort to KNOW EACH OTHER. But loving one another means more than knowing each other.

(2) WE VALUE EACH OTHER. We are all different. We come with different experiences, of churches small and large; conservative, moderate and liberal (whatever those words may mean); from different regions of the country and of the world, and a wide variety of traditions, Protestant and Catholic. We have diverse gifts and talents, interests and expertise, diverse theological and political beliefs. Our ages span nearly 100 years, our health and energy also run the continuum.

My first thoughts as I prepared this sermon were, "We know each other. We accept each other." Given our diversity, it seemed like a lot just to say that – we accept each other. It is not always easy to accept people who are really different from us, for example, to accept people who hold beliefs with which we strongly disagree. But loving one another means more than accepting each other. That's why I chose the word value.

We value each other. We affirm the diversity of gifts and beliefs as a blessing. We affirm the value and worth of each and every person – those with experiences and interests and beliefs that are different than our own, not just those to whom we're drawn because we think alike. We seek and give thanks for every opportunity to work and teach and learn and fellowship with one another.

This is the unity in our diversity. We recognize and celebrate that each one is made in the image of God, each one is a gift from God to this community. We are here because we have experienced the love of God revealed in Jesus Christ. We have made a commitment to him and to this particular community gathered in his name. We know each other. We value each other.

(3) WE CARE FOR EACH OTHER. There are so many ways that we can care for each other. It begins in worship. At the beginning of each service we are invited to share our prayer concerns by writing them on a slip of paper, brought to the preacher to be included in the prayers of the people. Following our confession and the assurance of God's forgiveness, we greet each other with a prayer, "The peace of Christ be with you." Although they may be routine, such acts should not be taken lightly. The bulletin each week contains a list of people for whom we are invited to pray, during the worship service, but also throughout the week. We care – and show our care – by praying for each other.

We also care for each other by listening. We take time to ask about each other's lives, and to listen to hear each other's joys and sorrows, hopes and fears. We make the effort to call someone on the prayer list, to inquire, "how are you...how is she...how are they doing?" We take the initiative to call someone whom we haven't seen in church to say, "I noticed you haven't been here. I've missed you. Is everything okay?" *and* to listen to hear the response. We care for each other by listening, *and* by sharing ourselves, giving them the opportunity to listen to us. When we are in a time of personal crisis, or in the hospital for treatment, others cannot care for us, the pastor cannot come to call, if we don't let them know!

I am so glad that our Stephen Ministry program has been resurrected. The Stephen Ministers are individuals among us who have been carefully trained to engage in a wonderful ministry of caring through listening to people in times of special need. We can care for each other by referring a person who would benefit from such care. Those with particular gifts may want to become Stephen ministers themselves. We care for each other by giving our time and help, spiritual and material. We care for our children by learning their names, and welcoming them in worship, by teaching Sunday School and leading youth groups. We care for our young adults by sending them care packages when they're stationed overseas or struggling with exams, by equipping them for leadership in the church. We care for our care-givers by giving them respite from the care of a child or a spouse or a parent, by sharing our expertise and community resources.

The Deacons and the Pastoral Care Team, too, are actively engaged in caring for members and friends on behalf of the whole church. They are arranging transportation to get people to worship, delivering communion "to the furthest pew" when someone cannot be here, freezing meals to have on hand to deliver in a family's time of need, keeping active a prayer chain – a chain of prayers. We are grateful for their gifts and the ministries of caring these teams provide on behalf of all of us. They don't take the place of what we do as individuals, but they do extend further what we can do as a community to care for one another. The opportunities are endless!!

I have two last thoughts with which I would like to close. First, a caveat. Some of you may be thinking....BUT the church doesn't exist for itself. We shouldn't be focused on ourselves. We're called to serve God in the world. I agree.....EXCEPT that I also believe loving one another within the church equips us to serve God in the world.

I am reminded of a seminary professor who talked about the need for us as individuals to love ourselves, that is, to care for ourselves, before we could serve others. In his words, we need “to get ourselves together” in order “to give ourselves away.” I would say that “we are the church, and we need to get ourselves together in order to give ourselves away.” That means not taking for granted, but talking about what, it means to love one another within the church.

Second, a word about our immediate context. We are all happily aware that next Sunday Bill Hennessy, our new pastor and head of staff, will begin his ministry with us. It will be a great occasion, and we all anticipate a wonderful partnership and many years of ministry together. As you may have surmised, it is also, I believe, an opportunity for us to reflect upon what it means to be a loving community, a fellowship of people who love one another. Like parents whose love expands to embrace a new child, our love will expand to enfold Bill and his family. In the weeks and months ahead we will have the opportunity to get to know and value and care for them, and to let them get to know and value and care for us.

I hope that there will be other opportunities to love, that we will welcome back individuals who have left us during this time of transition (for whatever reason). I hope we will welcome into membership friends who have been waiting for stable leadership. I hope we will welcome visitors and newcomers who have heard we have a new pastor and want to check us out. I pray that when they worship and fellowship with us, they will experience our love for one another and want to become a part of this loving community.

The church I grew up in was dually aligned with the ABC and the SBC. It was a remarkable church founded by a pastor committed to social justice and Christian fellowship. Among its southern traditions was an altar call at the end of each service. I vividly remember the Sunday that I walked down the aisle. I had been through the discipleship class twice to be sure that I wanted to accept Christ as my savior. The day that I publicly said, “yes,” was a snowy Christmas Day. My family had walked to church. The service included a time of sharing joys and concerns, and I remember members of the congregation with tears in their eyes as the pastor shared news of the death of a loved one. The experience of a caring Christian fellowship was so powerful that I knew I wanted to be a part of it.

My prayer is that everyone who comes to North Church – long-time members, those who’ve joined recently, friends and visitors – will experience the depth and power of our love for one another, and rejoice to be a part of our Christian community.

God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them. Since God has loved us so much, we also ought to love one another. Beloved, let us love one another. Amen.