

St. Peter Evangelical Lutheran Church + Modesto, California
The Sixth Sunday of Easter + May 25, 2003

Sermon by Pastor Jonathan Micheel

John 15:9-17

⁹ "As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Now remain in my love. ¹⁰ If you obey my commands, you will remain in my love, just as I have obeyed my Father's commands and remain in his love. ¹¹ I have told you this so that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete. ¹² My command is this: Love each other as I have loved you. ¹³ Greater love has no one than this, that he lay down his life for his friends. ¹⁴ You are my friends if you do what I command. ¹⁵ I no longer call you servants, because a servant does not know his master's business. Instead, I have called you friends, for everything that I learned from my Father I have made known to you. ¹⁶ You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you to go and bear fruit—fruit that will last. Then the Father will give you whatever you ask in my name. ¹⁷ This is my command: Love each other." (NIV)

Stay in Love

Dear brothers and sisters of our Lord,

I've noticed something about certain movies and TV shows. I'm thinking especially of romantic comedies. (I'm not going to ask for a show of hands or anything today so that the men don't have to admit watching these.) In a lot of romantic comedies, the story revolves around two people falling in love. There are the obligatory "I-like-her-does she-like-me" parts of the plot, there's the worry that love will go unrequited, there are zany plot twists aplenty. And then, at the end, the two people find their way into each others arms. They have fallen in love. The end. Roll credits.

But falling in love is the easy part. The hard part is *staying* in love. After the butterflies in the stomach have flown away. Getting through the tough times in the relationship. That's hard.

Staying in love is what Jesus talks to his disciples about—both the disciples gathered there in the Upper Room and the disciples gathered in this room today. The love he's talking about is far deeper and far greater than the love in any romantic movie. The love he speaks of is his love for sinful people, people like his first disciples, people like you and me.

Jesus' message to his disciples of all time is: I love you. Now stay in my love. Let's notice two characteristics about the love of Jesus today. First, that it is stable, and second, that it is always in motion.

This love is stable...

Jesus begins this section with some mind-boggling words: As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. This love of which Jesus speaks—how can we describe it? We can't. "As the Father has loved me..." Who can measure the love that God the Father has for his only begotten Son? Who can quantify the love that exists between two persons of the Holy Trinity? No one.

But that's exactly the point Jesus is making, isn't it? When Jesus talks about how he loves us, he doesn't go groping about for examples from movies or TV to illustrate his love. He goes right to the top. As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you.

Jesus doesn't use human love to illustrate his love for us. We know why. The love that we display is far from perfect. To be honest, we often fail to love when love is needed the most. We can even fail spectacularly when it comes to loving the people we refer to as "loved ones". A sharp word here, a cold shoulder there. And our love for God isn't any better. If anything, it's often worse. God tells us to love him above all things, to let no other person or thing take priority over him. And we fail, diverting our love to other things. We were right to say to God, "I am by nature sinful, and I have sinned against you in my thoughts, words and actions. I have done what is evil and failed to do what is good. I deserve your punishment both now and in eternity."

Yet we praise God, because his love is decidedly different. In spite of our sinfulness, God has loved us. He has loved us so much that he sent Jesus to suffer that punishment for us. The Father sent his beloved Son to the cross to release us from our sins and all their punishment, and his Son went to that cross willingly. Now, instead of punishment, we receive gifts from God: forgiveness for every sin, a place in his family, an inheritance in heaven that nothing can destroy.

This love is in a class by itself. St. John was right to say, This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins. (1 John 4: 10) Our love for God—instable, even on its best days. But God's love for us—absolutely stable and rock solid. The sacrifice he made to release you from hell—it has been made. It is done. Nothing can undo it. Your sins are atoned for. Jesus has loved you, and he still does!

To drive his point home, Jesus says, Greater love has no one than this, that he lay down his life for his friends. This is on our minds on Memorial Day weekend. Tomorrow we will pause to remember those who have laid down their lives for us. Thousands have done it. They have given their lives to defend our nation and its people—including you and me.

Author Ernest Gordon, in his book *Miracle on the River Kwai*, tells a story about sacrificial love. During World War II, some Scottish prisoners of war were being forced by their Japanese captors to build a railway through

Southeast Asia. In the harsh conditions, the prisoners were beginning to turn on each other. But then, one afternoon, something happened.

"A shovel was missing. The officer in charge became enraged. He demanded that the missing shovel be produced, or else. When nobody in the squadron budged, the officer got his gun and threatened to kill them all on the spot... It was obvious the officer meant what he had said. Then, finally, one man stepped forward. The officer put away his gun, picked up a shovel, and beat the man to death. When it was over, the survivors picked up the bloody corpse and carried it with them to the second tool check. This time, no shovel was missing. Indeed, there had been a miscount at the first check point.

"The word spread like wildfire through the whole camp. An innocent man had been willing to die to save the others!"

An innocent man has been willing to die to save us. His name is Jesus. Out of pure love for you he died. His death takes away all your sins. And his death cannot be undone. So when you fail to love God as he commands, when you fail to love the people around you as God wants you to, go to Jesus. He will take you in his arms, forgive you. No sin is too great. His love is stronger than any sin.

...Yet always in motion

Jesus' love for us has actually done something to us: it has changed our status. He says, I no longer call you servants, because a servant does not know his master's business. Instead, I have called you friends, for everything that I learned from my Father I have made known to you. You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you to go and bear fruit—fruit that will last.

My eighth grade teacher, when we would ask why we had to do something that he told us to do, would paraphrase a line from Tennyson's famous poem, "The Charge of the Light Brigade." It's a poem about a famous battle in which soldiers carried out orders and bravely charged the enemy lines. We would say to our teacher, "Mr. Rahn, why do we have to do this?" And he would jokingly reply, "Yours not to reason why, yours but to do and die!"

Jesus could treat us that way. He could call us servants (that word he uses can be translated "slaves")—he could call us slaves, couldn't he? After all, we would not exist if it weren't for him. For by him all things were created. (Colossians 1:16) He has the right to tell us what to do. He could justifiably give us orders and expect them to be followed: "Love each other! Why? Because I said so!"

But that's not how Jesus treats us. Because he loves us, he has chosen us to be his friends. Instead of just issuing commands, Jesus talks to us intimately. He says, "I knew you before you ever knew me. I loved you before you ever acknowledged me. And I laid down my life for you. Now I

want you to love as I have loved you. I want more people to know my love, to experience it. And I want to use you to share my love with them." I no longer call you servants... Instead, I have called you friends... You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you to go and bear fruit—fruit that will last.

And here's the fruit Jesus wants us to bear: My command is this: Love each other as I have loved you.

Jesus had said, Greater love has no one than this, that he lay down his life for his friends. The one laying down his life for his friends—that's Jesus, right? But notice something about that statement: Jesus does not restrict this to himself. He doesn't say, "I'm going to lay down my life for you to show my love, but of course I don't expect *you* to ever do anything extreme like that!" Jesus doesn't say that. He simply says, Greater love has no one than this, that he lay down his life for his friends, implying (shockingly!) that his love might move us to do the same thing.

Friends of Jesus, someone has laid down his life for you. He has given his body into death as a sacrifice to free you from all your sins. He has poured out his blood for you so that you could stand forgiven in the sight of God. Love him for that. And show your love by loving the people around you. Jesus may not ask you to give your life for someone else. But he asks all of us to give ourselves away for the sake of others.

He may ask you to give away your energy as you love the kids in your house. He may be asking you to give up some time to help someone in need. He may be asking you to give up some "ammunition" that you could have used in a future fight by forgiving something done to you instead of holding onto it. He may be asking you to give some money to fund a missionary who tells the love of Jesus in foreign lands. For that matter, he may be asking you to give the good news of God to someone you know who doesn't know it yet.

Do you get the picture? Jesus loves us, and as a result we love the people around us. And the love we have for people is always in motion. It is always moving. It is always motivating us to look for those in need and to act to help them. Jesus' love wraps us up, enfolds us. It possesses us and moves us to love. Since we are in Christ's love, Martin Luther says this:

You are not to sit still without fruit and works; but you are to come into the open and let other people benefit from you and also gain from your message, confession, service and help. Thus they can surely see that your faith is genuine. (Luther's Works, 24:262f.)

We are in Christ's love, and that love in us is always in motion.

But what about when it isn't? Who of us can say, "I always love people in exactly the way Jesus wants me to"? What about when we fail to love as Christ has loved us? Then we go back to the stable love that Jesus has for us. We confess, and he in love absolves us, giving us more love and a fresh start.

The story I related earlier from World War II—there's a postscript to the story. Remember, an innocent man has just sacrificed his life to save his friends. Gordon writes, "The word spread like wildfire through the whole camp. An innocent man had been willing to die to save the others! ...The incident had a profound effect... The men [who had been at each other's throats] began to treat each other like brothers.

"When the victorious Allies swept in, the survivors, human skeletons, lined up in front of their captors... (and instead of attacking their captors) insisted: 'No more hatred. No more killing. Now what we need is forgiveness.'"

Someone has died to save you. Nothing can change that. He has called you his friend, and his love is real in your life. May that love set you in motion, to love one another as he has loved you.

Jesus Christ loves you. Stay in his love. Amen.