

"All You Need Is Love"

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Menifee United Church of Christ

God of Grace,
May the words of my mouth,
and the meditation of my heart,
come from you,
and be a blessing to those who need them.
Amen.

Harry was in trouble. Harry forgot his wedding anniversary. Sally, Harry's wife, was angry. Sally told Harry, "There better be a gift in the driveway tomorrow morning that goes from zero to two hundred in six seconds." Sure enough, Sally got up the next morning, looked outside, and there was a gift in the driveway. She went and opened it, and it went from zero to two hundred in six seconds. It was a bathroom scale!

Why is it so difficult to get love right? I don't know; probably because some of us are idiots like Harry. And while love is a many splendored thing, it's also a very complicated thing. It's not easy to get right. It's like the book, "Men Are From Mars, Women Are From Venus." Whether we are men or women, we don't always think on the same wavelength, we don't communicate in the same way, so love is sometimes difficult to get right.

I talk about love when I do weddings. Of course I do. I talk about the great religious philosophers who've had things to say about love over the years. I quote great religious philosophers like the Dalai Lama, who said, "Love is a necessity, not a luxury." I quote great religious philosophers like Mother Teresa, who says, "Love begins with a smile." And I quote great religious philosophers like The Beatles, who say, "All you need is love." All you need IS love. But when you think about it, you also need other things, especially in a marriage, like understanding, and forgiveness and joy.

What are the different kinds of love? Well, there's romantic love, eros, like the kind that married couples have, hopefully. There's philo, brotherly love, where the word Philadelphia comes from, the city of brotherly love, friendship. And then there's divine love, compassionate love, some would say Christian love, agape. That's what I want to talk about with you today.

Jesus tells us to love one another. In the gospel of John Jesus tells his disciples, "I give you a new commandment: that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. Thus they will know that you are my disciples."

Now, was Jesus saying this just so that the disciples would love each other? Or that maybe members of a church would love each other? Or maybe members of a denomination would love each other? Or maybe members of a single faith tradition would love each other? I don't think so. I think Jesus was talking to everyone, to love one another. Not just the disciples, not just the members of a church, not just the members of a denomination, not just the members of a faith tradition, but everyone: Christians and Jews, Buddhists and Hindus, Muslims and atheists. Everyone should love one another. That's the kind of love that Jesus wants us to have.

Jesus also tells us to love God. In the gospel of Matthew, Jesus is asked by a lawyer, "What is the greatest commandment?" Jesus says that the greatest commandment, the first commandment, is to "love God with all your heart, soul and mind. This is the greatest and first commandment."

How do we love God? Well, I believe we love God the way we love our loved ones, by giving God our time. By

spending time with God. I believe that's one reason we come to church, to spend time with God. But that's only an hour a week or so, depending on how long-winded the minister is. We also need to spend time with God by reading the Bible. Kathleen and I try to read the Bible every day. If you read four chapters of the Bible each day, you'll get through the Bible in a year. So we read three chapters from the Hebrew scriptures, the Old Testament, and one chapter from the New Testament, which should get us through the Bible in a year. Another way to spend time with God is in prayer, speaking to God. Some people say our lives should be a prayer. We need to pray to God, to speak to God, to spend time with God. Another way to spend time with God is to listen to God. Not just pray to God, but to listen to God. That's why I do the prayer the way I do it. I start off saying, "We're going to take a moment, God, to listen to what you have to say to us before we say what we want to say to you." The Bible says, "Be still and know." We need to go deep within ourselves, to listen to what God is saying to us. Some people call it meditation, some people call it contemplation, some people call it solitude. Just sitting and listening to God. I try to sit and breathe in and out through my nose. Don't be a mouth breather. And sometimes when I breathe in, when I inhale, I say to myself the word "love," and when I exhale, I say to myself the word "hate." So I inhale love and I exhale hate, symbolically bringing, I hope, love into my spirit, into my heart, into my soul, and getting rid of the hate from my spirit, my soul, my heart. But spending time with God, spending time in nature, in God's creation, is one way to show that we love God. To appreciate, to give thanks for all God has given us.

Jesus tells us to love our neighbor. That same passage in Matthew says to "love God with all your heart, soul and mind, this is the first and greatest commandment. And a second is like it, to love your neighbor."

How do we love our neighbor? Well, I believe we love our neighbor by remembering that our neighbor, like us, is made in the image of God, is a child of God, is loved by God, is loved by God unconditionally, as we are. To remember that our neighbor, who can be the person living next door to us or someone half a world away, to remember that our neighbor may need help, and so to offer our neighbor help. Jesus says to "feed the hungry" and to "clothe the naked" and to "welcome the stranger" and that's what we should do with our neighbor, that's how we can love our neighbor. To remember that our neighbor is not our clone, may not be exactly like us, and that's OK. To remember that our neighbor, chances are, is different than us, thinks differently than us, votes differently than us, and that's OK. We need to love our neighbor, Jesus says.

Jesus tells us to love ourselves. What? Jesus says to love ourselves? He does. It's part of that same passage of Matthew, where the greatest commandment is to love God, and then a second is like it, to love your neighbor as yourself.

I think that's the third great commandment, to love yourself. Not in a narcissistic, egotistical, self-centered way, but in a healthy way. To remember that you are a child of God. That you are a descendant of Adam and Eve, a descendant of Noah, a descendant of Abraham, that we're all one and that we are loved equally by God. And sometimes maybe we have to remind ourselves and say things to ourselves to remind us that we are loved. Because sometimes, perhaps, you had a childhood where you heard that you weren't loved. Maybe you attended a church where you heard that God didn't love you. That God in fact hated you. And you need to change that. You need to change that loop in your head. Maybe you got it from your parents or your pastor years ago. I say an affirmation pretty much every day. I say, "Love surrounds me, love envelops me, love permeates my being. Love flows from me, love flows to me. I am loved and I am love." I say that to remind me that God loves me. As God loves you. I say that to remind me that others love me. And that I need to love myself and to love others. Whatever it takes for you to love yourself, I encourage you to do that.

Jesus tells us to even love our enemies! According to the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew, Jesus says, "You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy,' but I say to you, 'Love your enemy.'"

Now how do we love our enemies? Well, the best way to love your enemy, probably, is not to have any. To be

like Will Rogers, who said, "I never met a man I didn't like." Maybe to expand that a little, "I never met a man, woman, or child that I didn't like." Jesus wants us to love our enemies. I don't believe that Jesus had any enemies. There might have been people that didn't like Jesus, but I don't think that Jesus didn't like anybody. I believe Jesus loved everybody. And so another way to love our enemies is to do what Jesus did on the cross, where he looked at those who put him there, he looked at those who nailed him to the cross, and said, "God, forgive them, for they know not what they do." My goodness! And if those people didn't know what they were doing to Jesus and Jesus was able to forgive them, how much easier would it be or should it be for us to be able to forgive those who've done us wrong, who've done something to hurt us? We need to follow the example of Jesus and love our enemies. As difficult as that may be.

This church will vote in a few minutes on loving everyone, loving everyone. It's called Open and Affirming. It's the United Church of Christ designation that says we welcome, celebrate, and love every person of every age, sex, race, class, faith, marital status, sexual orientation and gender identity. And there's probably a couple others I forgot. It just means we love everybody. And isn't that what a church should do? To love everybody. To love everyone. No matter who it is. No matter who they are. No matter who they love. We are to love everyone.

And hopefully, because I think this church has already considered itself Open and Affirming, this will just make it official. This will let people that come to our website know that we are Open and Affirming, that we welcome everybody, that we celebrate everybody, that we love everybody. This will let the denomination know and they'll put it on their website. So if someone comes to Menifee and looks for a United Church of Christ church that's Open and Affirming, they will see us listed there. It will demonstrate that we love everyone.

My daughter called me the other day. I said, "Hello?" Erin said, "Bill!" I said, "I'm sorry, you have the wrong number." Erin said, "Dad." I said, "That's better!" We tease each other every now and then. I call her young'un, she calls me old'un. I think when we do that, we show that we love each other. I love her. I hope and pray and believe that she loves me.

So how can we love everyone? Probably by loving others the way good parents love their children, unconditionally, no matter what. The way God loves us, unconditionally, no matter what. God loves us because God made us in God's image. God loves us because God blessed us. God loves us because we are God's children and that's how we're to love everyone else and that's why we're to love everyone else, because we're all God's children. We're all children of the Most High God. We may not all look alike, we may not all think alike, we may not all act alike, we may not all vote alike, but we are all children of God. And we need to love everyone the way God loves us, the way Jesus loves us, the way the Holy Spirit loves us.

Let us pray:

God of Love,

Help us to love everyone.

Help us to love you with all our heart, soul and mind.

And help us to love ourselves.

Now and forevermore.

By the power of the Holy Spirit.

And in the name of Jesus.

Amen.