

St. John's Lutheran Church, ELCA Walhalla, SC
Sermon for May 21, 2017

What is Love? – Jan Long

Gospel: John 14:15-21

In final words to his disciples on the night of his arrest, Jesus encourages obedience to his commandments and speaks of the Spirit, who will be with them forever.

[Jesus said to the disciples:] ¹⁵“If you love me, you will keep my commandments. ¹⁶And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate, to be with you forever. ¹⁷This is the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees him nor knows him. You know him, because he abides with you, and he will be in you.

¹⁸“I will not leave you orphaned; I am coming to you. ¹⁹In a little while the world will no longer see me, but you will see me; because I live, you also will live. ²⁰On that day you will know that I am in my Father, and you in me, and I in you. ²¹They who have my commandments and keep them are those who love me; and those who love me will be loved by my Father, and I will love them and reveal myself to them.”

Good morning and welcome to St. John's Lutheran Church! You may have noticed that all of the service participants today are women. That's because today is WELCA Sunday where we celebrate all of the Women of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. Without these women, we could not accomplish the many projects and events we execute throughout the year. Our women are phenomenal in their talents and in their giving of both their time and those talents. Since we are recognizing the women today, this message will be aimed at them; however, it will apply to all of us. Let us begin with a short word of prayer.

Almighty, God, We ask you to be with us today; to share the Love You alone have for each of us. We struggle to understand how wide, how long, how high and how deep Your Love is. Help us to recognize the signs of Your Love within ourselves and within our neighbors. In Your holy name, Amen.

Today's gospel quotes Jesus on the night of His arrest. In His final words to His disciples, He encourages them to obey His commandments. We all know His most important commandment is, "to Love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind."

So, what exactly is Love? According to the dictionary, it is "an intense feeling of deep affection." But is that it? Just a feeling? I believe the dictionary missed the true definition. 1 Corinthians defines Love like this: "If I speak in the tongues of mortals and of angels, but do not have Love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but do not have Love, I am nothing. If I give away all my possessions, and if I hand over my body so that I may boast, but do not have Love, I gain nothing. Love is patient; Love is kind; Love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth. It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love never ends."

God Loves us with this same unconditional Love. So unconditional in fact, that He GAVE His only begotten Son to die on a cross for us. All because He Loves us so much. We have not earned His Love, we don't deserve it and certainly we don't always emulate Him with our Love for our neighbors. Instead, we tend to lament about the "trials" that come with Loving someone else and lose our focus on the whole picture.

One of my favorite Christian contemporary artists, Laura Story, wrote these lyrics that explain this concept a little better. The name of her song is: "**Blessings**" and her lyrics are as follows:

We pray for blessings, we pray for peace
Comfort for family, protection while we sleep
We pray for healing, for prosperity
We pray for Your mighty hand to ease our suffering
We pray for wisdom, Your voice to hear
We cry in anger when we cannot feel You near
We doubt your goodness, we doubt Your Love
As if every promise from Your Word is not enough
When friends betray us
When darkness seems to win
We know that pain, it reminds our heart
That this is not our home

Because what if your blessings come through rain drops

What if Your healing comes through tears

What if a thousand sleepless nights are what it takes to know You're near

What if my greatest disappointments or the aching of this life

Is the revealing of a greater thirst this world can't satisfy

What if trials of this life

The rain, the storms, the hardest nights

Are Your mercies in disguise?

And that's it. What if we need the rain, the tears and the hardest nights to see You, Lord? Perhaps it is through these trials that Your Love is revealed to us.

I have a short story I want to share with you about God's Love. It talks about the rain, the storms, the hardest nights. And it tells us about His Love found in the midst of them all.

One day, I woke early in the morning to watch the sunrise. Ahh, the beauty of God's creation is beyond description. As I watched, I praised God for His beautiful work. And as I sat there, I felt the Lord's presence with me.

He smiled and asked me, "Do you Love Me?"

I answered, "Of course, God! You are my Lord and Savior!"

He paused for a moment, then asked, "If you were physically handicapped, would you still Love Me?"

I was perplexed. I looked down upon my arms, legs and the rest of my body and wondered how many things I wouldn't be able to do if I was handicapped; thought of all the things that I took for granted. And I answered, "It would be tough Lord, but I would still Love You."

Then the Lord said, "If you were blind, would you still Love My creation?"

How could I Love something without being able to see it? Then I thought of all the blind people in the world and how many of them still Loved God and His creation. So I answered, "Its hard to think of it, but I would still Love You."

The Lord then asked me, “If you were deaf, would you still listen to My Word?”

How could I listen to anything being deaf? Then I understood. Listening to God’s Word is not merely using our ears, but our hearts. I answered, “It would be tough, but I would still listen to Your Word.”

The Lord then asked, “If you were mute, would you still praise My Name?”

How could I praise without a voice? Then it occurred to me: God wants us to sing from our very heart and soul. It never matters what we sound like. And praising God is not always with a song. For when we are persecuted, we give God praise through our words of thanks. So I answered, “Though I could not physically sing, I would still praise Your Holy Name.”

And the Lord asked, “Do you really Love Me?”

With courage and a strong conviction, I answered boldly, “Yes Lord! I Love You because You are the One and Only True God!”

I thought I had answered well, but God asked, “Then why do you sin?”

I answered with shame, “Because I am only human. I am not perfect.”

“Then why in times of peace do you stray the furthest? Why only in times of trouble do you pray with earnest?”

I had no answers. Only tears.

The Lord continued: “Why only sing at fellowships and retreats? Why seek Me only in times of worship or times of trouble? Why ask for things so selfishly and unfaithfully?”

My only answer was the tears that continued to roll down my cheeks.

“Why are you ashamed of Me? Why are you not spreading the Good News? Why in times of persecution do you cry to others when I offer My shoulder to cry on? Why make excuses when I give you opportunities to serve in My Name?”

I opened my mouth and tried to answer, but there was no answer to give. I closed my mouth in a sad frown.

He continued, “You are blessed with life. I made you the way you are. I have blessed you with sight, hearing and voice; I have given you talents to serve Me, but you choose otherwise. I have revealed My Word to you, but you do not act with the knowledge it teaches. I have shown My blessings to you, but your eyes were turned away. I have spoken to you, but your ears were closed. I have given you the ability to share My Good News, but you remain silent. Yet, I have heard your prayers and I have answered them all. Do you truly Love Me?”

I could not answer. How could I? I was embarrassed beyond belief. I had no excuse. What could I say to this? My heart had cried out and the tears had flowed. Finally I said, "Please forgive me Lord. I am unworthy to be Your child."

The Lord answered, "My Grace is sufficient for you, My child."

I asked, "Why do you continue to forgive me? Why do You Love me so much?"

The Lord answered, “Because you are My creation. You are my child. I will never abandon you; never will I forsake you or leave you. When you cry, I will have compassion and cry with you. When you shout with joy, I will laugh with you. When you are down, I will encourage you. When you fall, I will raise you up. When you are tired, I will carry you. I will be with you till the end of days, and I will Love you forever.”

Never had I cried so hard before. How could I have been so cold? How could I have hurt God as I had done? I asked God, “How much do You Love me?”

The Lord stretched out His arms, and said, "I Love you this much." I saw His nail-pierced hands and I bowed down at the feet of Christ, my Savior. And for the first time, I understood what real Love is.

As I walked away, I wondered if I had any wounds that needed to be healed, friendships that needed to be rekindled or if three important words needed to be said... for sometimes, "I Love you" can heal and bless!

Suppose one morning you were called to come home to God... do all of your friends know you care about them? Remind your special friends and relatives that you Love them dearly, while you can, even if you don't think they Love you back. You would be amazed at what those three little words, a smile, and a reminder like this can do.

Turn now to the person sitting nearest to you and tell them that God Loves them and so do you!

Remember, Love doesn't make the world go round. Love is what makes the ride worthwhile.

Thank you for riding with me. And please know that I Love you all!

Amen