

## Love in the Time Covid-19

John 13:12-16, 31-35  
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Who would have imagined the next time I saw you all it would be like this – socially distanced technology, that is often annoying, but is likely keeping us alive. Some of us. The infection and the death rates are soaring. Some I know have died, others closer to me have contracted this Coronavirus. I check Facebook every morning to see if my old swim coach is better or worse.

We were not ready for this, of course – for either the virus or the crazy social and political divisions tearing our country apart. Not ready to be isolated in our homes and cut off from sources of companionship and meaning. Not prepared for so many things to abruptly end, for things left undone and unsaid. It's a shock to our whole system and it seems to me to be displaced, at least partly, human decency and love. It has aggravated the breach in our nation, and contributed to hatred and violence.

My son, Sam and his wife are – like so many – working at home, swapping off on caring for my grandsons (Bo, the new one, born in May). Zoom, YouTube, Portal and curbside pick-up are helpful innovations. An old friend of mine wrote me a real letter, 6 pages, on paper the other day; it came in an envelope! Still, I confess to mental and physical lethargy, enervation, numbness. I'm tired of this; I'm sure you are also. So here we are, and next Sunday is Advent, where we start over with the story of our faith, longing for Christ to appear among us again. And I'm grateful for the invitation from your Pastor, Terry, to preach today. If I were you, I would look forward with a hungry heart to learn how she helps you to hope and prepare for Christ Jesus, Pfizer or Moderna to show up among us with something helpful. (No pressure, Terry!)

The political crisis and the pandemic both may have stretched to the breaking point our capacity to love one another. But Love is what Jesus both gives us and asks of us. Lutheran scholar Wes Granberg-Michaelson observes that we tend to start any question with our political beliefs and then try to figure out how religion can fit in and justify our position – that, instead of starting with Christ's love, his compassion for the poor and objections to culture's social barriers.<sup>1</sup> Or as Fr. Richard Rohr puts it, Love is “the incarnational message at the heart of the Gospel...it is a Christ-soaked universe.”<sup>2</sup>

I obviously lifted this sermon title from Gabriel Garcia Marquez's 1985 book Love in the Time of Cholera. (Good book if you haven't read it.) He writes about the fear, love and suffering in a Columbian town on the Caribbean – the passion of a doctor to find a cure, a couple's passionate affair during the plague, lives changed permanently by a pandemic, and love that, in the end, will not die. We get the word cholera from “choleric” - which can mean passion or anger, and it helps the author compare passion to a disease. “What is love?”, Marquez asks in his novel. And he tries to answer. Spoiler alert - at the end, the two lovers, well into their 70's, are finally united. He writes, “It was as if they had leapt over the arduous Calvary of conjugal life and gone straight to the heart of love. They were together in silence like an old married couple wary of life... for they had lived together long enough to know that love was always love, any time and any place, but it was more solid the closer it came to death.”<sup>3</sup>

Love was more solid the closer it came to death. I think we're there. So that's what I am going to say today – simply 'Love each other.' In the church, friends and family, the world. Of all the gospels, John's is the most obvious about having love at the core of the story. The text I'm using today picks up where he has making an example of his love for the disciples by washing their feet. He *says* so: *If I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. For I have set you an*

*example, that you also should do as I have done to you. Servants are not greater than their master, nor are messengers greater than the one who sent them. Just at that point, Judas went out to betray him, probably because Judas' politics were more important to him than his faith. And Jesus gives these critical instructions to 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. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.'*

Simple. Love one another. Why is that so hard for us to do? Do we overthink it? Some commentators, to figure out exactly what was being said, amuse me when, every time they examine "love" in John's gospel. They remind us that in the original Greek there are different words for "Love," and they want to distinguish between "agape" (Godly love) and "filia" (deep friendship), "sturge" (sitting by the fire with your dog) and "eros" (from which we get *erotic*). I've concluded **it doesn't matter**. If we want to think the conversation took place at all, they didn't use *any* of those words. Jesus, and Peter and the rest didn't speak Greek, or maybe some spoke a bit, but it wasn't their first language and they didn't use it among themselves. They spoke Aramaic, a derivative of Hebrew, which (like English and Spanish) brilliantly has one word for love. Love always blurs at the edges anyway.

Jesus' kind of love was/is not about how you might *feel* about someone; It is at least that, I guess, but it is more than that. Jesus' love is action, how we treat and care for one another. Again, it is at least that but it is more than that, Jesus' kind of love is a state of being, like breathing life itself. It is *all* of those Greek ideas and more. Love is *who you are*, because you were made in the image of God. So when you don't live *lovingly*, you are not being real, you are outside your own being, your own truth. What will outlive us is who and how we have loved. 1 John 4:16 says it: *God is love, and who lives in Love, live in God, and God lives in them.*" It is not magic and it is not automatic. I like what Civil Rights lawyer Valeri eKaur writes: *Love is more than a feeling. Love is a form of sweet labor, fierce, bloody imperfect and life-giving- a choice we make over and over again. If love is sweet labor, love can be taught, modeled and practiced.*<sup>4</sup> Is not that what we do as a church, as a Christian community?

(I'm going to say a thing here I said in 2014.) But where is there another established community of people who offer something for nothing – God's free grace, unconditional welcome? Where is there another established community whose main concern is that the world has more love in it? Where, is there another community where all you have to do to be important is walk in the door? What people will pass on the ways of God to children, and search for transcendent wonder? Yes, that happens fairly randomly here and there. But what other outfit commits to preserve truth, and to exhibit of heaven to the world? We do. Who will help you come regularly into the presence of God? Yes you can pray out in nature, but where is the practice of prayer even preserved, or taught to the young? Who else will remember the many names of God? You could Google it, but isn't it better to learn those words from a people who are on a first-name basis with the Creator? Who else will make a home in the heart of the city, show the way out of death, or make their bed in hell itself for the sake of love?

So love is our job, our life's work, wherever that takes place day to day. But here is the thing – Jesus did not come among us to start a movement, and certainly not to start a religion. (We did that.) He taught, loved, healed, and (with the exception of a handful of disciples) sent people back into their lives to live and love their world into something better. Our faith was never supposed to be about getting into heaven; Christianity has made a mess of Jesus' teaching. No, it is about loving each other, loving the *world*. What if we love what, how and whom God loves? Then we become real.

So do that. Not easy though, right? The key to start is to *Pay Attention*, pay attention to the world around you and the people in it. When do we hear God speaking? Who helps us see it? Stephen

Colbert said on TV, “My wife is evidence of the way God talks.” Yeah. Okay. Mine too, I think. How do our leaders speak? Do we learn about love from the White House? No I guess not. So where do we learn about love? What have you learned about love from... a Sunday School teacher? Family? Colleagues? I have a younger friend with a terminal disease, in hospice (he has outlived the doctors' projections by some months now), and he is still writing. He is so close to the mystery, is seeing truth so clearly, that I am rapt by every sentence. He already sees through the veil into ... I don't know. Yet.

Grace and Love may show up in unlikely places. As part of the sabbatical you gave me in 2014, I found myself in a venue on 6<sup>th</sup> St. in Austin, TX during SXSW, by happenstance working as a roadie for a North Carolina band. The place was packed wall-to-wall. The NC band was coming on after Billy Joe Shaver (big name in C&W), and Tom and I were at the bar, waiting with a beer. Billy Joe was singing his usual rowdy misogynistic songs, and at the end of the set went into the whimsical song from the *Crazy Heart* movie, - “*I'm gonna live forever. I'm gonna cross that river, I'm gonna catch tomorrow now. When this old world is blown asunder, and the stars fall from the sky. Remember someone really loves you. We'll live forever, you and I.*”<sup>5</sup> The raucous, half-drunk crowd had gone silent, and they were swaying a bit, throbbing?, to the song. Tom looked at me and asked, “What just happened?” (Me) “We're in church brother.”

Look for the signs of love, and the chance to love one another. Jesus said, “*I have set you an example. Do for one another as I have done for you. Love one another as I have loved you.*” That's it. Or (you'd be disappointed if I didn't quote my favorite theologian) as Kristofferson says, “*Life is the question and life is the answer, and God is the reason, and Love is the Way.*”<sup>6</sup>

- 1) Granberg-Michaelson, Wes. Future Faith, Fortress Press, 2018.
  - 2) Rohr, Richard, “Daily Meditation”, Center for Action and Contemplation, 2020.
  - 3) Marquez, Gabriel Garcia. Love in the Time of Cholera, Alfred Knopf, 1988
  - 4) Kaur, Valerie. See No Stranger, p. xvi, Random House, 2020.
  - 5) Shaver, Billy Joe. “I'm Gonna Live Forever.” The Real Deal, Compadre Records, 2006.
  - 6) Kristofferson, Kris, “Love is the Way.” Repossessed, Mercury Records, 1986.
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