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Love One Another  
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1 John 4:7-12, 16-21

If someone were to look back at the subjects of my sermons from the last 30 years, I suspect that **love** would be the topic that I've talked about the most. Reading the New Testament, it's clear that **love is the distinguishing characteristic of a follower of Christ**. Jesus says loving God and our neighbor are the two commandments on which hang all the law and the prophets. **Love is first in the list of the Fruit of the Spirit. Loving one another is what identifies us as people who truly know God.** Of all the "one another's" in the New Testament, it's probably not a surprise that "**love another**" appears far more than any other one (for example, *John 13:34-35, 1 Thessalonians 3:12, 4:9; 1 Peter 1:22; 1 John 3:11, 4:7, 11; 2 John 5*). **About one third of all the "one another's" instruct Christians to love one another.**

So far today we've heard about the need to **love one another** from *John 13, John 15*, and *1 John 4*. Here's a little more about love from *1 John 4:16-21*,

**"So we have known and believe the love that God has for us. God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them. Love has been perfected among us in this: that we may have boldness on the day of judgment, because as he is, so are we in this world. There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear; for fear has to do with punishment, and whoever fears has not reached perfection in love. We love because he first loved us. Those who say, 'I love God,' and hate their brothers or sisters, are liars; for those who do not love a brother or sister whom they have seen, cannot love God whom they have not seen. The commandment we have from him is this: those who love God must love their brothers and sisters also."**

I'd like to suggest to you today that in the passages about **loving one another** we see a **Progression of Love**. What I mean by that is at the lowest level there is the idea of **loving our neighbor as our self**, which is expressed by Jesus (*Matthew 22:39*) and by Paul in *Galatians 5:13b-14*, "**Through love**, become slaves to one another. For the whole law is summed up in a single commandment, '**You shall love your neighbor as yourself.**'" **Love your neighbor as yourself** is the most basic expression of loving one another. But think about that phrase a little more deeply. What if you don't love yourself? What if your love for your self isn't healthy? What if it's immature, selfish or narcissistic? Then loving other people as you love yourself may not be that healthy or helpful for our neighbor. One fundamental truth about love is that we can't share or give what we don't possess ourselves. If we don't have an appropriate, healthy and mature love for our self, we won't be able to love anyone else in a way that's appropriate, healthy and mature.

In the *Gospel of John 13:34-35*, Jesus raises the level of love from loving others as we love ourselves to loving others as Christ has loved us: **"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.**” This command to love one another is about love **within** and **among** members of the faith community, which may seem easier at first than the demand to love one’s neighbor as oneself (*Matthew 19:19; 22:39; Mark 12:31*) or to love one’s enemies (*Matthew 5:44; Luke 6:27-35*). **In John’s Gospel, this is the only commandment that Jesus explicitly identifies for his disciples and insists that they keep.** But when you look at the context, there’s nothing easy about keeping the commandment to love one another. What happens right before Jesus speaks these words about love? Judas departs in *John 13:30*, “And it was **night**.” This is significant because light and darkness, day and night are significant themes in *John*. Jesus had said he was the light of the world and in *John 9:4* declared, “We must work the works of him who sent me while it is day; night is coming when no one can work.” Judas misses all that Jesus says from here all the way through *John* chapter 17.

What follows Jesus’ words about loving one another in *John 13*? Jesus warning Peter that before the cock crows in the morning, Peter will deny knowing him three times. **In John’s Gospel, Jesus’ teaching about love and discipleship are placed in the context of betrayal and death.** In *John 13*, the example to which the love commandment points is the love of Jesus for his disciples, a love that’s fullest and final expression comes in his death. Jesus’ followers are exhorted to love one another as fully as he loves them, a love that may find its expression in the laying down of one’s life. Which Jesus states plainly in *John 15:13*—as the progression of love goes even higher—**“No one has greater love than this, to lay down one’s life for one’s friends.”** You see the progression, “love your neighbor as yourself, love one another as I have loved you. No one has greater love than this...”

To model our love on a love whose ultimate expression is the gift of one’s life is to model our love on a love that has no limit, that knows no boundaries or restrictions. To interpret Jesus’ death as the ultimate act of love enables us to see that the love to which Jesus calls his followers is not the giving **up** of one’s life, but the giving **away** of one’s life. The distinction is important because the love Jesus embodies is grace. Jesus gave his life to his disciples as an expression of the fullness of his relationship with God and of God’s love for the world. Jesus’ death in love was an act of fullness, of living out his life and identity fully, even when that love and living would ultimately lead to death.

To love one another as Jesus loves us doesn’t automatically translate into one believer’s death for another, but to love another as Jesus loves us is to live a life thoroughly shaped by a love that knows no limits, by a love whose expression brings us closer into relationship with God, Jesus and with one another. It is living a love that carries with it a whole new concept of what it means to live in community.

The commandment to love one another is the sole explicit commandment of Jesus in the entire *Gospel of John*. The church’s witness in the world is always hurt and undermined by the hatred and lack of love that too often marks Christians’ dealings with one another. In our nation, there are millions of people who claim to be Jesus’ followers, who appear to be making little or no effort to love other believers who may think or vote differently than they do. In

some ways, it's easier to love one's enemies because we don't usually see or interact with them very often.

Jesus promised that the community's love for one another would be a signal to everyone that they were Jesus' disciples, yet that signal can be harmed by divisions and discord within the Christian community. The commandment to love one another opens the possibility of community with God and Jesus and community with one another, but it's not an easy word to keep. *1 John 3:11* states, "For this is the message you have heard from the beginning, that we should love one another." **Fourteen times in the New Testament we are told to "love one another."** Love is not a secondhand emotion like Tina Turner sang in a song. It's a laying down of our lives for one another. For most of us, this is not a one time, truly giving of our life like Jesus on the cross, or people like firefighters or soldiers. Loving one another by laying down our lives is shown in less dramatic, more mundane, everyday little things, in how we treat people. Loving one another is shown in being kind, forgiving, listening, being charitable, not insisting on our own way, praying, serving, caring, bearing burdens, protecting, and strengthening. There are many ways to demonstrate love in church.

Loving one another in the same way Jesus loves us is a sign of authentic Christian discipleship. We don't want the Good News of God's love for us in Jesus, which the scriptures tell us to share, to become the Good Rules we're trying to enforce. What Jonathan Swift wrote many years ago is still sadly true today, **"We have just enough religion to make us hate, but not enough to make us love one another."** John says that love for others is a sign that we've passed from death to life. *1 John 3:11-18* pushes us to take a hard look at the violence in our society and its root in a lack of love. He reminds us that domestic violence ripped apart the very first family in the Bible when Cain murdered his brother Abel. *1 John* asserts that hatred is virtually the same as murder (which is something Jesus spoke about in the *Sermon on the Mount, Matthew 5:21-22*).

While that may seem like an exaggeration to many of us, it's a clear-sighted way to look at human relationships and interaction. Every day more people than we want to think about are murdered; most of them not by strangers or terrorists, but by family members and acquaintances. The horrible pattern begun by Cain against Abel has continued to this day. The hatred and lack of love between individuals is magnified among members of different nations and religions. One group doesn't mind bombing, starving or driving out others who are different because they're not "us." They're not our children, our family members, our friends. Every day around our country and the world we see the vicious cycle and the results of the lack of love for others.

One spiritual leader described the choice we face every moment this way, "Will you engage this moment with kindness or with cruelty, with love or with fear, with generosity or scarcity, with a joyous heart or an embittered one? This is your choice, and no one can make it for you. **If you**

**choose kindness, love, generosity, and joy, then you will discover in that choice the Kingdom of God.”<sup>1</sup>**

Author Victor Hugo who is best known for *Les Misérables* **wrote the supreme happiness of life is the conviction that we are loved.** We love something or someone when we promote its good for its own sake. Love’s contrary is malice, and its simple absence is indifference. *1 John 3:16* says, “We know love by this, that he laid down his life for us—and **we ought to lay down our lives for one another.**”

At home, school, work, church, on the street or in a store, wherever we are, we’re called to love one another. Clarence Jordan’s Cotton Patch version of *1 John 3:18* is, “**My little ones, let’s not talk about love. Let’s not sing about love. Let’s put love into action and make it real.**” That’s what we want to do.

The love of Jesus Christ is what can truly transform the human heart. God pours love into our hearts and God’s love is “**The love that conquers sin and wipes out shame and heals wounds and reconciles enemies and patches broken dreams and ultimately changes the world, one life at a time.**”<sup>2</sup> Reflect on your own life. Ask yourself, “How much love is demonstrated in my life?” In what small or significant ways can you demonstrate love this week? John Wesley wrote, “We should always remember that love is the highest gift of God. All our revelations and gifts are little things compared to love. There is nothing higher in religion. If you are looking for anything else, you are looking wide of the mark. Settle in your heart that from this moment on you will aim at nothing more than that love described in the thirteenth chapter of *1 Corinthians*. You can go no higher than this.”<sup>3</sup>

In *Romans 13:8*, Paul writes, “Owe no one anything, **except to love one another; for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law.**”

*Ephesians 4:1b-2*, “Lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, **bearing with one another in love.**” In the musical *Fiddler on the Roof*, the lead character Tevye asks his wife Golde, if she loves him and they go back and forth:

Tevye: **Do you love me?** Golde: Do I what?

Tevye: **Do you love me?** Golde: Do I love you?

With our daughters getting married and this trouble in the town,  
You're upset. You want out. Go inside. Go lie down. Maybe it's indigestion.

Tevye: Golde, I'm asking you a question. **Do you love me?**

Golde: You're a fool!

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<sup>1</sup> Rabbi Rami Shapiro, *The Sacred Art of Lovingkindness: Preparing to Practice* (Sky Light Paths Publishing: 2006), xi-xii.

<sup>2</sup> Bill Hybels, *Courageous Leadership*, Zondervan, 2002, 21.

<sup>3</sup> Richard Foster & James Bryan Smith, Editors, *Devotional Classics*, Harper San Francisco, 1990, 282.

Tevye: I know. **But do you love me?**

Golde: Do I love you? For twenty-five years, I've washed your clothes,  
Cooked your meals, cleaned your house, given you children, milked the cow.  
After twenty-five years, why talk about love right now?

The answer is because Teyve needs to know after all these years with their daughters all leaving home that he is loved. At the end of *John's Gospel*, Peter who had denied Christ three times, is asked by the risen Christ three times if he loves him. Jesus doesn't ask Peter, or Matthew or you or me, "What do you know?" He doesn't ask Peter, or Matthew or you or me, "What do you believe?" He doesn't tell Peter, Matthew, you or me, to worship Him. What he asks Peter he asks all of us, "Do you love me?" This is the critical question for all of us because **we are what we love**, and we become like who or what we love and praise. Which is why it's so important that we be very discerning about who and what we love and praise. May we love the Lord with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength and one another as Christ has loved us.

**Prayer:** *Philippians 1:9-11*, "And this is my prayer: **that your love may abound more and more in knowledge and depth of insight**, so that you may be able to discern what is best and may be pure and blameless for the day of Christ, filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ—to the glory and praise of God."

**Blessing:** "Let all that you do be done in love." *1 Corinthians 16:14*

### Questions for Discussion or Reflection

1. Why do you think Jesus waits until after Judas has left to give his "new command" to "love one another" in *John 13:34-35*?
2. Why is love for one another the best evidence that the eleven apostles, or those of us at BBC, are Jesus' followers?
3. In *John 15:16*, Jesus tells the disciples that he has appointed them "to go and bear fruit—fruit that will last." What is the "fruit that will last"?
4. How do *John 15:9* and *15:12* tie together? How is love the essential dynamic of the Christian life?
5. How does *John 15:12-13* take Jesus' command to love even further than *John 13:34-35*?
6. In *1 John 4:7-21*, love is mentioned 27 times. What models of love (its effect, its motive, its action) do you see in this passage?
7. What does *1 John* say about the relationship of love and fear? Why is this significant? How can you put the sacrificial love of Christ into practice this coming week?

The Gospel of John 15:12-17, "This is my commandment, that you **love one another as I have loved you**. **No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends**. You are my friends if you do what I command you. I do not call you servants any longer, because the servant does not know what the master is doing; but I have called you

friends, because I have made known to you everything that I have heard from my Father. You did not choose me but I chose you. And I appointed you to go and bear fruit, fruit that will last, so that the Father will give you whatever you ask him in my name. **I am giving you these commands so that you may love one another.**”

1 John 4:7-12. “Beloved let us love one another, because love is from God; everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love. God’s love **was revealed** among us in this way: God **sent** his only Son into the world so that we might live through him. In this is love, not that we loved God but that he **loved us** and sent his Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins. Beloved, since God **loved us** so much, **we also ought to love one another**. No one has ever seen God; if we love one another, God lives in us, and his love is perfected in us.”