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Preached at Head of Christiana Presbyterian Church, May 25, 2014

Sixth Sunday of Easter

## “The Work of Love”

John 14: 15-21

I remember in my first preaching class in seminary getting the advice, “Don’t use the word ‘love’ in a sermon unless it’s in the text itself.” At the time I had no idea what they meant – because isn’t God’s love pretty basic to our beliefs? Shouldn’t we be talking about love *every* Sunday??

Now I’m not one for hard and fast rules anyway (and I’m pretty sure I haven’t actually followed this one), but as I’m working through this passage from John’s gospel, I think I finally understand what they were getting at.

‘Love’ is a pretty common word – it should be pretty obvious what we mean by it, shouldn’t it? But the way John uses the word ‘love’ doesn’t exactly line up with any of the things we mean when we say “I love ice cream,” or “I love my wife,” or “I love my church.” Now maybe “I love my kids” is starting to get close to what Jesus is saying about God’s love for us, but then he goes and uses the same word to describe the way we love Jesus. Those of you who have kids, correct me if I’m wrong, but that’s just not quite the same thing either.

I’m wondering if the intention behind this advice was not “don’t *talk about* love” – far from it! – but rather, be aware that if you start using the word ‘love,’ you should be prepared to spend half your sermon defining what you actually *mean* when you say ‘love.’ It’s a word that for us means so many different things, all the way from your favorite desserts to that clenching feeling in your chest of “falling in love” to the birth of a child; in the words of Elizabeth Stone - “Making the decision to have a child - it is momentous. It is to decide forever to have your heart go walking around outside your body.”

In English, we’ve only got the one word for ‘love,’ and so we rely on poetry to say what we mean. In Greek, there are at least three words that translate ‘love,’ which you’d think would make things easier; except that the author of the gospel of John seems to use two of them basically interchangeably. And so we get to this passage and the verse, “If you love me, you will keep my commandments,” and we could scratch our heads and wonder whether he’s talking about a feeling (but *what* feeling, exactly?) or something concrete and measurable – but then, how do we measure it, and what are we looking for anyway?

(Church attendance? Donations to the offering? How often you read the Bible?)

But there’s one thing we do know: just one chapter ago, earlier in Jesus’ farewell to his disciples at what we know as the Last Supper, he summed up all of his teachings in one new commandment: “that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another.” And perhaps this is our best clue as to what Jesus is getting at: all the things we’ve seen Jesus do so far in the gospels, the ways Jesus has been with his friends and perhaps even with his enemies, *that’s* what he

means by 'love.' All this teaching and listening and eating together, the turning over tables and frustrating both his inquisitors and his disciples with answers that don't fit their views of the world; and even the arrest and torture that is to come, but particularly the perplexing joy of the resurrection that will follow; all of that is love.

That's a lot bigger than a bouquet of flowers after an argument.

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The Freire Charter School in Center City Philadelphia has a lot of students who come from poor families and bad neighborhoods. But they tried something different in their efforts to reduce violence and fear in school – an event they called *Take Back the City*. On the first day, students were asked to brainstorm how they would answer the question, "If you really knew me, this is what you'd know." And then on the second day, as the school gathered in the First Unitarian Church because they don't have an auditorium large enough for the whole student body, a handful of students stood up and answered that question in front of their classmates.

One 10th grader, named Tyshierra, told the story of waking up one morning to find her mother dead, strangled by her boyfriend. She said, "Losing my mother was my biggest fear. Since that has already happened, I fear nothing and no one. Y'all see me as goofy, funny or whatever else, but deep down inside, I'm hurting for the way my life is."

Another student shared her diagnosis of Lupus, an autoimmune disease that means she's not expected to live past about 30. One boy, Elijah, choked through tears as he told them that he's grateful for his strong relationship with his grandmother and his friends, but that he struggles with depression, and when things get hard, he has thoughts of suicide.

The head of school, Kelly Davenport, says that violence grows out of students feeling isolated. Events like this make clear to them that they're not alone. "When a community can come together and celebrate the humanity in each of our kids," she says, "that gives each and every one of our students the right just to be who they are, and to make that OK."

And it seems to have worked, at least in some small part. Tyshierra says, even weeks after the assembly, that she's felt a real shift in school culture. Before it, she says, "everybody just was like, 'OK, we at school.' But now, it's like we feel like a family, like we know all that about each other."

And Elijah says he's been approached in the halls by kids who used to be strangers; he says, "They hug me or they give me a handshake, and then they was telling me stories like, 'Yeah, I know what you was dealing with. I went through the same thing.'"

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Love makes us vulnerable, and love makes us strong. And that is not an easy thing. The love that Jesus modeled for us cost him his life – and yet he says, "just as I have loved you, you should love one another." If you love me, he says, that's what you'll do.

But he's not trying to guilt us or play some sort of trump card like an abusive boyfriend – “Well, if you *really* loved me, you'd do what I want” – no, for Jesus this seems to be just a logical conclusion. Love for him *means* love for one another. And then in turn, those who love Jesus and love one another with this kind of deep and radical openness that makes us both vulnerable and strong, those friends will be loved by the Creator who will dwell with them and in them.

It's a challenge to us, isn't it? That kind of love means standing up when our dear ones are in danger, it means speaking our own truth even when our voice shakes, it means risking comfort and privilege and the silence of things-not-spoken; it means stepping out of the shadows for one another and trusting that another beloved will do the same for us.

That love is a risk. And yet Jesus promises, to those friends he has been standing with and teaching to raise up their own voices, he promises, “I will not leave you orphaned. I am coming to you.” He says, I and my Father will send you another Advocate, a helper, a comforter, to be with you forever. And this Spirit is not just a warm fuzzy feeling; this second Advocate will like Jesus stand up with us and *advocate* for us.

As we risk our selves in this dangerous business of trying to love one another, we do not stand alone. All the glory of our triune God is with us in this holy work of love – within us, above us, beside us, among us – strengthening us as we let ourselves be vulnerable, taking the leap of faith of opening ourselves up to one another and honoring the lives of those we meet. Taking the risk of seeing the Divine presence in others, even those we think are different.

As one Freire student said, "Just because I come in jolly, and I'm happy and I walk in heels and I strut, doesn't mean I live a happy life. And I try to stay strong, but sometimes it's hard, and people don't understand that."

And so, let us go forth into this world which is so in need of love; let us go emboldened by the presence of the living God within and among us, that we might risk recognizing the presence of God in those around us.

By the grace of God, amen.