

Framed by Love

John 14:15-21

On my desk, I have a framed photo of myself, and Paul taken several years ago. It's a simple pose with a plain background in a gold-toned frame from a drug store. In other words, objectively speaking, the photo and its frame are really nothing special. They have no artistic or monetary value in the marketplace. Yet no matter how full my desk gets with books and files, there's always room for that photo too, because I think of it as framed by love - the romantic love of two people, the friendship and partnership love that has deepened over the years, the love we have for God who has joined us together.

The words of Christ in our text this morning is also framed by love. At the start of our reading, he says, "If you love me, you will keep my commandments". This is no threat. Jesus is not saying, do this or else. Instead, his words are a statement of identity. If you love me, this is how you will live. If you love me, you will keep my commandments. Then at the end of our reading, Christ rephrases the same statement of identity: "They who have my commandments and keep them are those who love me".

Earlier in John's gospel, Christ said to his disciples, "I give you a new commandment, that you love one another". At the time, Christ had just demonstrated his love for the disciples by washing their feet. For their teacher to perform such a lowly task for them was a striking illustration of love and service. The "new commandment" was a reminder that they too were called to love one another.

Yet this so-called new commandment to love was already an old commandment, an ancient commandment. Centuries earlier in the Old Testament, God instructed the people in Leviticus 19:18, "You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against any of your people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself: I am the Lord". Earlier in Christ's own ministry, when a lawyer asked him about the greatest commandment, Christ spoke of loving God and loving your neighbor as yourself.

So, when Christ told his disciples to love one another, it was hardly telling them anything new. Instead, it gave them a very old and very familiar commandment. They had heard it before and could probably say by heart. But the way Christ defined love was new, Christ said, "Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another".

Christ showed love for The disciples repeatedly. They were invited into a relationship. Christ shared the good news of God's kingdom and taught them. Christ settled their quarrels and answered their questions. They were included in the ministry. They were forgiven for falling asleep in the garden and deserting Christ in time of need. And finally, Christ would die on the cross. Clearly for Christ, love meant even more than washing feet.

Christ's love for the disciples and for the world cost his life. It was a self-giving, sacrificial love. It was love in action - often unexpected like washing feet or talking with a Samaritan woman or healing a blind man. For Christ, love was literally a matter of life and death. What's more, Jesus said, that's how all people will know that you are my disciples, when you love one another just as I have loved you.

That's an impossibly high standard, isn't it? Who among the disciples could love like Christ? Who among us can love in that surprising, self-giving, and sacrificial way? If that's the gold standard of love, we might as well cut our losses and give up now!

But in our text, Christ also tells the disciples that they will not be abandon, to struggle along on their own. Instead, Christ says, "I will ask the Creator, and God will give you another advocate, to be with you forever". The word "advocate" may also be translated as encourager, comforter, helper, mediator. Although Christ would leave the disciples, God's Spirit as advocate and mediator would be ever present to encourage, comfort, and help them. That included helping the disciples to love one another.

For us today, God's Spirit also helps us. When love seems too demanding, when we struggle to live out our identity as beloved by God and loving others, we have an encourager and helper. When we lose our way and need to find it again, we have an advocate and mediator to comfort us and bring us home.

When it comes to loving relationships today, many of us might think first of our biological families: mother and father, brother and sister, our spouse, our children. But Christ remained single, and during earthly ministry expanded the definition of love and family life beyond the biological family. So, when Christ's mother and siblings came looking for him, the gospel of Mark says that Christ replied, "'Who are my mother and my brothers?' And looking at those who sat around said, 'Here are my mother and my brothers! Whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother'". Christ's definition of love and family reached beyond biological family to include the family of faith.

As followers of Christ, we also need to expand our definition of love and family to include the family of faith. That means our church family, and beyond that, the followers of Christ. Beyond the family of faith is the whole human family. In sending Christ, God's love embraced the world. That's the kind of love Christ showed in both life and death, and the kind of love God wants to work in and through us.

So, what if we could frame everything that happens in our lives with love? What would that look like? If there's a family tragedy or some other difficulty among us, can we frame that with love by our prayers, by a visit, a hug, a card, a phone call or text or email, a casserole dish, some baking, dropping by with groceries, giving a ride, offering to care for the children, being quiet together, crying together.

What about when we disappoint and fail one another?

If the definition of love is God, then failure seems inevitable, can we frame that with love? When we fall short, when we are too weary or pre-occupied to love others, can we confess and repent, make amends and forgive, and learn to care for one another again? Can we turn to God's Spirit to help us to keep loving one another?

And what about on a national and international scale? Instead of focusing only on our own needs, can we in love consider the needs of others? Can we demonstrate love by acting with justice and mercy, by sharing what we have and not taking more? Instead of hostility, can our political debates and discussions be framed by words of love and kindness?

To make a start on any of this, we'll need to encourage one another, and we'll need to be reminded of Christ's example and teaching. Our God leads the way. Our divine encourager helps us. So let us walk in the new commandment of God and love one another.

Our lives are framed by the love of God, from creation to new creation, from birth to life eternal. If we love God - since we love God - let us also love one another. With praise and thanks to God, Amen.