



LIFE IN ALL ITS FULLNESS

Real Love

SUNDAY, MAY 15, 2022
COVENANT PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

Sermon for Sunday, May 15, 2022
“Real Love” | Fifth Sunday of Easter
Pastor Charlie Berthoud | John 13:31-35

At weddings, I often give a little grammar lesson, reminding the soon-to-be married couple that love is both a noun and a verb. Usually, the noun of love comes first in a relationship. We fall in love, we feel the love. But for a relationship to survive and thrive, love has to become a verb, something active and intentional and purposeful.

Here at Covenant, we strive to learn God’s love—to remind one another of this love that God has for us and the world. But it doesn’t stop there, as we strive to live God’s love—to be active and intentional and purposeful in our love, to let that love of God become a verb for us.

Jesus commanded his followers to love—to love neighbors and even to love enemies. Jesus was particularly focused on concern for the lost, the least, and the last—the people who are too often ignored and unloved.

One way that we make this love real as a community is with our support of mission partners. You’ve already heard about our connection with Guatemala, where for 20 years we’ve been in partnership, trying to love our neighbors.

Later you’ll hear about Domestic Abuse Intervention Services—one of many local partners that we support, in the hope that love and justice and compassion and goodness would become more of a reality in this world, along with

In today’s gospel reading—the assigned reading from the lectionary, for the fifth Sunday of the Easter season—Jesus says something a little different about love. The focus is more inward, on the community.

Context is always important. Immediately prior to the reading, Jesus foreshadows the actions of Judas, telling his disciples that one of them will betray him. And just

after the reading, Jesus predicts—rightly we learn later—that Peter will deny Jesus three times.

Listen for God's word

³¹ When [Judas] had gone out, Jesus said, "Now the Son of Man has been glorified, and God has been glorified in him. ³² If God has been glorified in him, God will also glorify him in himself and will glorify him at once. ³³ Little children, I am with you only a little longer. You will look for me, and as I said to the Jews so now I say to you, 'Where I am going, you cannot come.' ³⁴ I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. ³⁵ By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another."

The betrayal of Judas and the denial of Peter didn't help build a strong community of disciples.

This "love one another" commandment seems to be focused on the disciple community, on how they care for and treat one another.

We too need to be mindful of how we care for and treat one another. Taking care of ourselves and our community is part of our calling.

Sadly, some churches focus almost exclusively on themselves, and those churches generally aren't very vibrant.

The challenge is finding the right balance. While mission work and supporting excellent partners like friends in Guatemala and groups like DAIS, we also have to care for one another.

We have a prayer list every week—that's one way we "love one another." We also list the elders, deacons, and staff on the bulletin each week, and that's another opportunity for us to care for our leaders. We also pass the peace in worship and with those of you worshipping online.

With these and other ways we try to make God's love real in our community, heeding Jesus' words to love one another.

Our world is filled with people who are doing wonderful work in the world, people who have courageously and sacrificially dedicated themselves to make this world a better place—doing so because of their Christian commitment—doctors and

nurses, police and firefighters, peacemakers and social workers, clergy and religious leaders. Our church has plenty of those people too.

However, I've known a few of these people over the years - a very small number - who didn't seem to get the memo on John 13, the teaching directed at the community, the idea of loving one another.

Such people, despite the good work they do in the world quite frankly they come across as rude and cold and mean in person. It's like they put all their "love energy" into their job or their cause or their issue, and then don't have anything left for the people in their day-to-day living.

At times I've wondered: how can this person who is doing such great work in the world be such a jerk one on one?

Like I said, this is a very small minority—and maybe people having a bad day.

Actually, I imagine all of us have been like this at one point or another. I know I can be a jerk. There have been times when I've been so caught up in "serving God" and working at the church that I've not been a great husband or father.

One of my favorite prayer resources in *A Diary of Private Prayer* by John Baillie. He has a morning prayer and an evening prayer for every day of the week. Some of those prayers touch on this idea of loving those closest to us, while we continue to serve God's purposes in the world.

"O Spirit unseen, be with me today wherever I go, but also stay with me when I am at home and among my family. Do not let me fail to show those nearest me the sympathy and consideration that you graciously help me to show other people. Do not let me refuse to show those closest to me the courtesy and kindness which I would show to strangers. Let charity begin at home today." John Baillie, in *A Diary of Private Prayer*

It wouldn't make much sense to go on a mission trip, or write a big check for a good cause, and then go home and be a jerk to your family, right?

One of our collective heroes embodies this holistic sense of goodness and love: Mr. Rogers, the kind and gentle and wise children’s television star. After his death, someone asked his wife, “Is he really like that at home.” She responded: “What you see is what you get.”



I yearn for that kind of integrity and authenticity.

I yearn for God’s spirit of kindness and goodness and love to permeate all that I say and do.

For us right now in 2022, the challenging thing is that our goodness and kindness muscles have kind of atrophied over the past two years, with Covid.

After so many months of limited face to face contact, we’ve lost some of our skills in being decent humans with each other.

So today in the hope of welcoming life in all its fullness and living as resurrection people and with the hope of taking Jesus’ words seriously, I invite you to take a minute to think intentionally and purposefully about loving one another, about loving the people closest to you.

I invite you to join me in setting some intentions for this week.

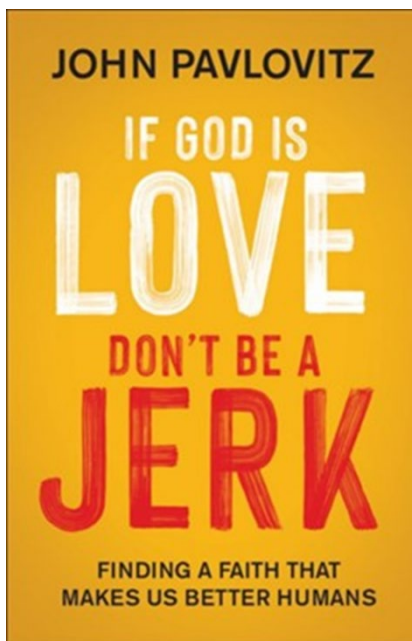
Wherever you are, take a deep breath and maybe close your eyes for just a minute or two.

- Think about the people you work with, or go to school with, or interact with on a daily basis, beyond your family. Maybe pick one person in particular, maybe someone who is having a hard time, maybe someone you are a little distant from. Think about that person and how you might be able to be kind and gracious, how you could support and encourage them this week.
- Now think about Covenant or whatever faith community you consider your home. Think about the people in that community, maybe one person in particular. Can you pray for that person, or reach out to them with compassion and kindness this week?

- Finally, think about your family or your loved ones, the people closest to you. This might be the people you live with or people you have a long term connection with. It's all too easy to take our loved ones for granted. How can you be kind and gracious to a loved one this week? How can you support and encourage a loved one this week? Maybe you want to ask a loved one: "What can I do to make your day better?"

I am far from perfect in any of these areas, but I try. Every morning I put on my wedding ring, and my intention is to pray: "Dear God, help me to be a good husband and a good father today." Some days I just go through the motions, and some days by the grace of God, there is some goodness and kindness. I find the key is to keeping praying and keep trying.

When I remember and re-experience the love of God, I find I'm better able to be loving and kind and patient with people around me.



Last fall, I heard about a book that I thought my wife might like. So I bought a copy, wrapped it up, and put it under the tree. On Christmas morning, I realized that she had the same thought, and she had got me a copy of the same book.

So we have two copies of a book called *If God Is Love, Don't Be A Jerk: Finding A Faith That Makes Us Better Humans*, by author and pastor John Pavlovitz.

Just to be clear, I don't think my wife is a jerk, and as far as I know she doesn't think I am. I haven't yet read the book, but I plan to do so in the next month or so. I read a review of it last week, which highlighted the final sentence of the book:

For God's sake and for the sake of hurting, exhausted, scared human beings around us, if we accomplish only one thing with our remaining days, let's love one another. (p. 214)

The good news of the gospel is that we are loved, that we have abundant life, life in all its fullness.

The good news can keep us from being jerks and strengthen us in love and help us

to make this world a better place. Thanks be to God.