

WHAT'S SO GREAT ABOUT LOVE A SERMON ON JOHN 13:1-38

by Rev. Russell B. Smith

Valentine's day. It's the time when we celebrate love. We see store displays with hearts — red and pink are everywhere. People will be sending greeting cards, roses, chocolates, jewelry — all of it will fly off the shelves. An aura of romance fills the air, or perhaps that's just expensive perfume.

However, our culture impresses upon us the idea that love is primarily a feeling that happens to us. Today's passage, however, demonstrates that love is primarily about *action* rather than feeling. Don't mistake what I'm saying — our emotions are vital and important parts of who we are. I am simply saying that love, from the Biblical perspective, is rooted in action.

Let's take a look at the scene from today's passage, John 13.

It was just before the Passover Feast. Jesus knew that the time had come for him to leave this world and go to the Father. Having loved his own who were in the world, he now showed them the full extent of his love.

The evening meal was being served, and the devil had already prompted Judas Iscariot, son of Simon, to betray Jesus. Jesus knew that the Father had put all things under his power, and that he had come from God and was returning to God; so he got up from the meal, took off his outer clothing, and wrapped a towel around his waist. After that, he poured water into a basin and began to wash his disciples' feet, drying them with the towel that was wrapped around him.

He came to Simon Peter, who said to him, "Lord, are you going to wash my feet?"

Jesus replied, "You do not realize now what I am doing, but later you will understand."

"No," said Peter, "you shall never wash my feet."

Jesus answered, "Unless I wash you, you have no part with me."

"Then, Lord," Simon Peter replied, "not just my feet but my hands and my head as well!"

Jesus answered, "A person who has had a bath needs only to wash his feet; his whole body is clean. And you are clean, though not every one of you." For he knew who was going to betray him, and that was why he said not every one was clean.

When he had finished washing their feet, he put on his clothes and returned to his place. "Do you understand what I have done for you?" he asked them. "You call me 'Teacher' and 'Lord,' and rightly so, for that is what I am. Now that I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also should wash one another's feet. I have set you an example that you should do as I have done for you. I tell you the truth, no servant is greater than his master, nor is a messenger greater than the one who sent him. Now that you know these things, you will be blessed if you do them.

"I am not referring to all of you; I know those I have chosen. But this is to fulfill the scripture: 'He who shares my bread has lifted up his heel against me.'

"I am telling you now before it happens, so that when it does happen you will believe that I am He. I tell you the truth, whoever accepts anyone I send accepts me; and whoever accepts me accepts the one who sent me."

After he had said this, Jesus was troubled in spirit and testified, "I tell you the truth, one of you is going to betray me."

His disciples stared at one another, at a loss to know which of them he meant. One of them, the disciple whom Jesus loved, was reclining next to him. Simon Peter motioned to this disciple and said, "Ask him which one he means."

Leaning back against Jesus, he asked him, "Lord, who is it?"

Jesus answered, "It is the one to whom I will give this piece of bread when I have dipped it in the dish." Then, dipping the piece of bread, he gave it to Judas Iscariot, son of Simon. As soon as Judas took the bread, Satan entered into him.

"What you are about to do, do quickly," Jesus told him, but no one at the meal understood why Jesus said this to him. Since

Judas had charge of the money, some thought Jesus was telling him to buy what was needed for the Feast, or to give something to the poor. As soon as Judas had taken the bread, he went out. And it was night.

When he was gone, Jesus said, "Now is the Son of Man glorified and God is glorified in him. If God is glorified in him, God will glorify the Son in himself, and will glorify him at once.

"My children, I will be with you only a little longer. You will look for me, and just as I told the Jews, so I tell you now: Where I am going, you cannot come.

"A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another."

Simon Peter asked him, "Lord, where are you going?"

Jesus replied, "Where I am going, you cannot follow now, but you will follow later."

Peter asked, "Lord, why can't I follow you now? I will lay down my life for you."

Then Jesus answered, "Will you really lay down your life for me? I tell you the truth, before the rooster crows, you will disown me three times!

Jesus and his disciples have returned to Jerusalem, where Jesus' enemies are on the lookout for him, to celebrate Passover. We saw last time how people were coming to recognize his Kingship — through the story of Mary's adoration, the crowd's adulation, and the asking of the Greek foreigners. He came in to the city at the peak of his popularity and the city crackles with expectation. The other gospels give accounts of his authoritative and confrontational teaching in the temple during holy week. Now Jesus and his disciples celebrate the Passover meal in private. Look at verse 1. Imagine — the disciples are full of exuberance, eagerly awaiting the reward that will come when Jesus establishes the kingdom of God. But Jesus knows what is coming. He has his eyes fixed on Calvary. So in these last hours before the soldiers come to take him away, Jesus gives his disciples a vivid example of the kind of life to which they are called. Jesus gives them an example of living a life of love.

The first thing he shows us is that love is about action. Look at verses 2-6. This was before paved roads. The dirt streets were dusty and dry and people who had some finances wore sandals upon their feet. Ordinarily, it was the duty

of the host to have a servant ready to wash the feet of guests so they might enjoy their meal in comfort. Since no servant was available, it logically would have fallen to one of the disciples to wash the feet of the others. Luke's account tells us that the disciples had just been arguing over who would be greatest in the kingdom. Clearly these great princes in the kingdom were too proud to perform the menial task of washing one another's feet. Imagine for a moment the perplexity among the disciples as the master — the last one who should be doing this — stands, puts on servant's clothing, and carries the basin to begin washing feet. Here Jesus teaches us that love is an action of service and humility. Jesus meets a need where others are too proud to act.

Lest his disciples miss the point, Jesus keeps coming back to it. Verses 13-17 show how Jesus instructs his disciples to follow his example by washing one another's feet. Again down in verse 34-35, Jesus says to love one another. Jesus' command here is to actively express our love to one another. In contemporary application, this applies to how we love and care for one another within the church. Of course Jesus is concerned with how we love people outside the church, but the focus here is how the disciples love one another.

The core values of Covenant-First Presbyterian are worship, witness, study, share and serve. This passage focuses on how we as Christians share our lives together. My point is that this sharing is not characterized by feelings of love, but the actions of love.

As we think about love as action rather than love as feeling, I believe the most accessible summary of Scripture's teaching on this is in Dr. Gary Chapman's book titled *The Five Love Languages*. Chapman's idea is this — that there are five main ways we as humans actively express love: touch, words of affirmation, quality time, gifts, and acts of service. These are the primary types of actions that we can take to show our love. Chapman believes that each of us specializes in one of these love languages — it is our primary way of expressing and understanding love. If we do not receive love back in that language, then we feel unloved. Our challenge as Christians is that we should all work on becoming masters of communicating love to our brothers and sisters. Chapman raises our awareness of how to accomplish what Jesus tells us to do. So we express our love through more **touch**: hugs, more handshakes, more comforting arms around the shoulders; through **words of affirmation**: more compliments, more notes of encouragement, more spontaneous praise; through **quality time**: more visits to elderly, more small group meetings in peoples homes, more spontaneous opportunities to fellowship; through **gifts**: more small "thinking of you" trinkets, more shared books of interest; through acts of **service**: more rides home, more sharing our gifts and abilities, more unexpected kindnesses. The end picture is that we put so much energy into showing love to one another that the blessing overflows and affects the watching world. There's a reason why

Jesus says, “By this all men will know you are my disciples.” If we love one another, the whole world will see and know.

After showing that love is **action**, Jesus also demonstrates that love is **receiving**. Looking at the passage, as Peter figures out what Jesus is doing, Peter tells Jesus to stop. Look how Jesus replies: “Unless I wash you, you have no part with me.” This is probably the hardest part of the passage — it’s easy for most of us to share our love with other people, but it is very hard to be the recipient. It takes humility to serve someone else; it takes even more humility to admit that you require service. Most of us like to think that we have everything together — that we are independent and can make it on our own. There’s an unspoken sense of shame with admitting that you need someone else. But as Jesus points out here, if you try to stand on your own, you can have no part of him. We cannot present ourselves before God as clean; we have to allow Jesus to cleanse us. In the same way, we cannot stand on our own, but we must rely upon the body of Christ in the world — the church. Each of us must learn to rely on the people sitting next to you and across from you. Learning that kind of humility is hard.

I was in Mexico for a mission’s trip through *Presbyterians for Renewal*. We had 80 or 90 teenagers and adult volunteers from Presbyterian churches across the U.S. We spent a week helping build houses in the border town of Reynosa. Every morning, we’d load up the vans and cross into Mexico so we could do our work. The neighborhood in which we worked was built on a landfill. It was dry and dusty and smelly and garbage was everywhere. The houses we were building were cinderblock squares no bigger than our church office. Assisting us were a number of local volunteers from the Mexican Presbyterian church. Because I speak a smattering of Spanish, I quickly became the team interpreter. I struck up conversations with some of the local volunteers and tried to develop some relationships. Because of these conversations, the local volunteers began to give me gifts — One lady gave me a handkerchief that she had made herself; another brought me an authentic homemade Mexican meal for lunch. At first I tried to protest. I tried to say “Oh no, you don’t have to do that.” After all, I had so much and these people had so little. I had come to help *them*. Then I realized how ungracious that would be. God taught me that I had to have the humility to *receive* their gracious gifts. Learning to let someone love you is one of the hardest lessons anyone can learn. That’s what Jesus demanded of Peter and that’s what he demands of us.

Not only is love **action** and love is **receiving**, but also love **extends to the unlovable**. Note that after Jesus performs this expression of love, he reveals that one of his followers will betray him, and he tells Peter to his face that Peter will deny him. He knows that Judas is a traitor, and he still shows love toward him. He knows that Peter will deny him, and he still shows love toward him. This is consistent with what Jesus taught in the Sermon on the Mount in

Matthew 5:43-44: "Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you." He gives a similar teaching in Luke 6:27-29. If Jesus could show love to Judas in this instance, how much more should we show love toward those who are ill disposed toward us? We withhold actions and love from those who irritate, annoy or inconvenience us, but Jesus shows us this is not the kingdom way. We ought to love those irritants all the more.

In October 1948, two men met by accident in a Tokyo train station. One was Mitsuo Fuchida, who seven years earlier had led the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor. Considered a hero during the war, he had returned to life as a farmer, bearing immense shame after the loss of the war. The other man was American Jacob Deshazer, who was a member of Doolittle's Raiders, the daring team that in 1942 flew an air raid over Tokyo in retaliation for Pearl Harbor. Deshazer's plane, however, ran out of fuel. He and his crewmembers bailed out of the plane, and spent the rest of the war in a Japanese prisoner of war camp. He had been routinely tortured and spent close to 34 months in solitary confinement. While in confinement, he began to ponder the human condition and he remembered Sunday School lessons he had learned as a child. He pestered his guards for a Bible. Two years after he had been captured, he finally received one. He devoured every page, making the most of his time to absorb the messages of grace, forgiveness, and love. After his release in 1945, he studied at Seattle Pacific College, only to return to Japan as a missionary. He was wearing handing out leaflets in the station when he encountered Fuchida. From that encounter, something stirred in Fuchida's heart. He got hold of a Bible and he soaked up the words of grace and became a Christian.

If Christ was filled with enough love to wash the feet of a traitor and a coward, if DeShazer had enough love to share Christ with his former enemy, then how much more should we express love to those who are unlovable to us? How much more should we love that irritating person who gets on our very last nerve? How much more should we love that person who talks incessantly without giving you a chance to reply? How much more should we love that person whose pettiness astounds us to no end? How much more should we love our brothers and sisters when they are childish, thoughtless, selfish, mean, and just plain rude? I know it's hard. It's impossible. We can't do it without Christ working within us. We couldn't do it if we didn't know that Christ loved them first. We couldn't do it if we didn't know that Christ loved us even when we were unlovable.

So try it. Intentionally act out love — look for opportunities to be a blessing. Have the humility to receive the blessing from others and graciously say "thank you". Finally, have the tenacity to love the unlovable. And when you have a hard time doing these things — talk to God. He knows you can't do it alone, so he'll help you discover what's so great about love. You think about that. Amen.