

Oak Grove Presbyterian Church

Rev. Dr. Bart Roush

July 16, 2023

John 15:9–17

Let us pray for an awareness of and inspiration from God’s Spirit.

God of all creation, send your Holy Spirit among us this day, that the seed of your Word might take root in our hearts, and bear the fruit of peace, love, and justice for all. Amen.

As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love. If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father’s commandments and abide in his love. I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete.

“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.

Before there were streaming services, and video on demand, and even before there were VCR’s where you could schedule a television show to record at the appropriate time, there was appointment television. That is, television shows that you would sometimes work your schedule around

to make sure you were available to watch it when it aired so that you wouldn't miss it. In the mid-1980's the network NBC had the distinction of being the place to be on Thursday nights. They dominated the ratings and it was known as "Must See TV." One of the biggest anchors to that "must see TV" was the comedy, "Cheers." It centered on a bar in Boston run by a former baseball player, and included loveable characters that were both staff and patrons of the bar. It was such a popular show that the series finale was watched by more than 93 million people, almost 40% of the US population at the time.

One of the most familiar things about the show was its theme song. The opening lines start with, "Makin' your way in the world today takes everything you've got. Takin' a break from all your worries sure would help a lot." And then the refrain would kick in with "Sometimes you wanna go, where everybody knows your name. And they're always glad you came You wanna be where you can see our troubles are all the same. You wanna be where everybody knows your name."

The theme song captured the theme of the show well, in that it expressed the desire for everyone to be known, to be welcome somewhere, to have the support of friends who are more like family. The people at Cheers were a group of people that shouldn't quite fit together, a group of misfits that somehow figured out how to belong to one another. Cheers was a place you could be known and where you could belong.

Belonging is a fundamental need for us as humans. We are made to be together. In the creation story, God declares that it is not good that the first human be alone. We are made in the image of God, which is a triune community. We are meant to be and created to belong to one another.

Since the formation of communities, and faith communities in particular, there have been discussions about what it means to belong. Who is in and who is out? How the communities determine how they know if someone belongs and how they are brought into the community. There are often questions around these three words, Believing, Behaving, and Belonging.

It used to be, not so long ago, maybe in the heyday of the church in America in the 1950's and 60's was that the three words went just as I named them. Believe, Behave, Belong. That is, if you wanted to be a member of a church you needed first to believe the right things, then to behave in the right ways, and then and only then could you belong.

Today, however, and particularly with younger people, churches are starting to make a shift in their understanding to Belong, Behave, and Believe. Belong, Behave, Believe. People now are interested to know what a community is about and figure out if they feel like they have a place there first.

Are they welcome? Can they find people that seem to get them or that they fit with? Do they have a sense of belonging? If so, maybe that person will then begin to become involved. In the case of the church, maybe they will participate in conversations or in service projects. Their sense of belonging is followed by actions and behavior. After those two things occur, maybe somewhere down the line, then they may come to believe. This trend, like most trends in the church, has been hastened by the pandemic. It is more true now than it was before.

And just because I have laid out the three words in this way doesn't mean that it is completely linear. There is some circularity to it as well. Our actions impact our belief, but our belief also impacts our actions, or at least, I think, it should.

In the passage from John, Jesus talks about abiding in him, in his love which is from God, and then invites the disciples to imitate him in how he loves. Imitation in the best sense of following a pattern, not in some poor sense of being a cheap copy. Follow him in his ways. He talks about this imitation as a means of joy. It is not a burden, a drudgery, but joy to follow.

There is a small word in the phrase – a conjunction – that has some interesting interpretive impact on this command from Jesus. Remember School House Rock, a conjunction is a word that links one clause to another, “Conjunction junction, what’s your function, hooking up words, and phrases, and clauses...”.

The conjunction is the Greek word *hina* which is translated as “that” but most often is translated as “in order that” There is another Greek word for “that” but it is not used in this passage, instead the word *hina* is used and *hina* is most often used when the writer or person wants to specify the purpose of something, “in order that, that, so that, for the purpose that”.

What this all means is that there is some interpretation to do around this command to love one another. Verse 12 says, “This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you.” or, said another way, “This is my commandment, in order that you love one another as I have loved you.”

When this is coupled with verse 17, “I am giving you these commands *for the purpose* that you may love one another, I imagine the scribes who preserved this text may have had some questions over whether Jesus issues one command, love one another, or if all the things that Jesus taught, collectively, were his command.

I think there is an argument to be made that “love one another” is not the command itself. It is the *purpose* of the things that Jesus commands. Jesus commanded “these things” so that they would love one another. The question becomes, “what does Jesus mean by “these things?”

It’s grounded in imitating him - and they have seen him do a lot. Heal, preach, teach, extend hospitality to people who are left out, challenge the religious traditions and authorities, eat with the wrong people, include some undesirables in his close circle, etc.

I believe the command to love is not the command, it’s all the other things. Those commands are given *in order* that they might love one another. Love, then, is not the command itself, but the fruits of and final purpose for keeping the commands. The kind of God we really believe in is revealed in how we treat one another. How we abide in the love of God. How we belong to one another. Our relationships with one another reveal to us what we really believe as opposed to what we *think* we believe, our convictions as opposed to our opinions.

As I mentioned before, being made in the image of God, a God that is a God who is three-in-one, means “the whole cosmos is predicated on a diverse and holy community.” And as author Cole Arthur Riley writes, “if we bear the image of God, that means we bear the image of a multitude. And that to bear the image of God in its fullness, we need each other.”ⁱ

Jesus goes so far as to declare that this needing one another is exhibited in our willingness to lay our own lives down for others. If we truly love, we are willing to sacrifice for one another. Love requires something from us.

One author says, “Few, if any of us, will be called to martyrdom; but all of us are called to a series of little deaths in the form of invitations to restrain or deny self....The sending of God by God was the sending of Love – a crucified Love willing to lay down its life for friends and enemies alike. Your mission and mine – which we can only perform insofar as we are in communion with God and with one another – is to submit, out of love for one another, to countless, daily ‘little deaths’ until we have yielded every least and last remnant of self to the purpose of Christ.”ⁱⁱ

We just can't love another, I think, without some surrender of our will. Or, to put it another way, when you love, it's no longer all about you. A truly loving community is a community of solidarity. Again, Cole Arthur Riley writes, “Solidarity is a group that stands together, and would do so for even its weakest member. It is that community which resists the intoxicating lie of individualism – we live for ourselves and by ourselves. Solidarity dismisses self-preservation in favor of a new way – to sense the injustice, need, or glory of any one part as the unflinching responsibility of the collective.”ⁱⁱⁱ

We cannot love in general, we must love in specifics. We love in community, we love in belonging. And our love is marked, is measured, by the fruit of that love, the result of that love. By how well we take care of one another. By how much those on the margins are included in the belonging. We cannot say we believe in love if our actions, our actions that are other-centered, do not demonstrate that love in tangible ways.

Jesus’ prayer and command was that the community that followed him be shaped in light of his actions and teachings. It’s not just about what we believe, but it’s also about how we act. And when I say act, I mean our own personal behavior, but I also mean action and ethics. The lives

we live are just as important as the words we confess with our mouths, no matter how confident or not we may be with those confessions.

Jesus offers and calls us to more than just connection but to real relationship. Not just simple connection, but relationship in community in all of its abundance. But to be fair, also with its complexity. Being in real, authentic, and honest community isn't always easy. Being in community, abiding with one another, means that we also risk getting hurt because it means being vulnerable. Being in community means that sometimes we have those moments, and that maybe we run into someone who is not so nice, or perhaps it means recognizing that we are the one who is not so nice. But being in community also means that when we run into those bumps that we also work it out. That we bear with one another in all things so that we can work toward bearing the good fruit of kindness, generosity, patience, joy, and love.

“Makin' your way in the world today takes everything you've got. Takin' a break from all your worries sure would help a lot.” “Sometimes you wanna go, where everybody knows your name. And they're always glad you came. You wanna be where you can see our troubles are all the same. You wanna be where everybody knows your name.”

May we all know what it is to abide in the love of Jesus in a community of love. May we all know what it is to belong.

Amen.

ⁱ Cole Arthur Riley, “This Here Flesh: Spirituality, Liberation, and the Stories That Make Us.” Page 73.

ⁱⁱ Robin Maas, “*Crucified Love*”

ⁱⁱⁱ Cole Arthur Riley, page 80.