

Pastor's Message – 5/9/21
John 15:9-17

There's a story from a Chicago Cubs' game a while back which tells us about what love can be. The ballgame was over and fans at Wrigley Field in Chicago were filing out. A few players were signing autographs. Then someone noticed an unusual scene playing out on the field. One guy nudged another and another and soon people all over the stadium had stopped to watch. One of the players had received an unusual request.

A father had brought his ten-year-old daughter to her very first game. She had had a great time -- the roar of the crowd -- smell of popcorn and taste of cotton candy. It had been great, even though she hadn't seen a thing – because she was blind.

All during the game, she had been asking her dad to explain to her how the field looked, and he had tried his best, but she still hadn't quite got it. So she wondered if she could walk around the field to get a better sense of it. But you don't just wander out onto a professional baseball diamond.

So they had hung around and instead of asking for an autograph, they had asked if the girl could walk the bases.

One of the players lifted her over the rail and together they walked past the guards to home plate. The little girl bent down and felt it. Then they started walking slowly around the bases with the player describing what the girl couldn't see. They touched first base, then second, then third. The whole time the little girl was grinning.

Now she understood. Finally, they crossed home plate and a roar of applause surprised both the girl and the player.

Thousands of fans had stopped and watched. They had seen the white cane and the ballplayer holding the little girl's hand. Thousands of fans had watched and cheered this very same player sprint to first to beat out a hit, or trot around the bases after hitting a home run, but this time, walking slowly around the bases holding a little girl's hand, this was his best home run ever.

The crowd gave him and his little teammate a standing ovation they'd never forget. That's the best -- that kind of kindness and love.

Our Bible reading today is all about the best kind of love. It follows up on our passage from last week wherein Jesus is speaking about God's vineyard and how He is the vine and His followers are the branches. It sits almost squarely in the middle of what are Jesus' final words before He goes to His death on the cross. Knowing that the end of his earthly life was approaching, Jesus instructs his disciples to remain in his love, to show the same kind of love as that shared between the Father and the Son. He tells His disciples to have the same kind of love that He has for us: a love that sacrifices for others – even to death.

We are loved, according to John's writing, because we are children of God. Those who are in God have been chosen by God. Love from God is a free gift. In God's love, we find meaning and purpose in life when we cooperate with one another; working as an interdependent team and sharing with one another what are God's plans for us.

Jesus tells us to love one another. Love exemplifies the behavior we use both with people we like and those we do not like. Jesus never said we have to like everybody, but we have to love them. It's not the mushy warm-fuzzy love that so often is the kind of love that is sung about and painted and written about, but is something more and something different.

Love, according to Jesus, shows patience and kindness. Love does not gloat when another makes a mistake. Love respects the abilities of another and allows that one to share those gifts. Jesus asks that we show respect to one another, to recognize the dignity of every person, and to recognize others as God's children. Love's behavior powerfully affirms our claim to be disciples of Jesus by the way we care for one another.

As Christians and perhaps in much of the world's culture, we tend to view sacrificial love only in the extreme, not in the mundane. Jesus Himself says, "There is no greater love than to lay down one's life for one's friends (vs. 13). But I believe it is imperative that we expand our horizon on the meaning of the phrase "lay down one's life." Laying down

one's life and sacrificing for another can be, in this day and time, even things like getting vaccinated, wearing face coverings, and practicing social distance to protect others from a potentially deadly disease.

Today we observe Mother's Day in the U.S. The best mothers are often those who are said to have sacrificed for the sake of the children and their families. The mother who gets up early every morning and goes to work daily for 40 years is practicing sacrificial love. The mother who does three loads of laundry each week is practicing sacrificial love. And those things are nowhere near all the ways in which mothers exemplify sacrificial love and what sacrificial love can look like.

The child who brings an elderly parent into her home and cares for him for untold years is practicing sacrificial love. The schoolteacher who skips watching television in the evenings to prepare a lesson that may capture students' attention is practicing sacrificial love. The school principal that stays with a child long after the lights have been turned out, waiting for that errant parent to come, is practicing sacrificial love.

If we are to remain in the Father's love, it is about sharing with those who are in need, spending time with a lonely child or an older person, seeking to understand a different worldview, or forgiving an old hurt.

Remaining in the love of God we see in Jesus is more than just attending Church on Sunday morning, more than having one's name on the list of Professing Members of a Church, or even calling oneself a Christian. To remain means to dwell with, to stick by, to live in, and to act out Christ's love.

The reading from John's gospel brings it all home. We are called to obey Christ's commandment to love one another as He has loved his own disciples (15:12). He loved his own disciples by fully investing his life in them, in their understanding about the ways of the kingdom of God now in their midst, and in their own growth in holiness (15:13). He loved them by discipling them so they could disciple others and thus become a channel by which others would disciple others and holiness would flourish among an ever-growing number of people across the earth.

But consider this often-skipped verse: “You are my friends if you should continue to do what I command you” (15:14). The status of friendship with Christ is not a given. It is conditional. It is conditional, as we have seen already, on continuing to abide in Christ as the branches abide in the vine. It is conditional as we see here on continuing to obey Christ's commandments, especially His commandment to love one another as He has loved his own disciples, investing His whole life in their formation so that they could do the same for others and bear much lasting fruit (15:16). God continues to love us, but we remain in God as we love, care for, and watch out for others.

As I reflect on Jesus' commandment to love, I think about a wave. Not an Atlantic Ocean or the Pacific Ocean wave or even a Fox Lake or Beaver Dam Lake or Lake Winnebago wave, but the sporting event wave. Who starts it? How do thousands of people get going all together in something like a rhythm? Somebody must start it. So why not you or me? The person who starts it is the one who starts it. When it starts, people get receptive to taking instruction. People cooperate. We experience what the computer types call a positive feedback loop. Everything is amplified. We don't have any special power, but we experience joy anyway. Waves really show you the difference between power and effect. In lots of situations, we don't really have any power. But we can have a big effect if the situation is set up right.

A small amount of power can have a large effect. Somebody starts every wave. Every joy and every experience of love starts somewhere. It doesn't just happen. Somebody starts every wave.

Try it sometime; why not now?

Next time you are at a party or social event and everyone starts making themselves feel good by putting down the people who aren't there, watch what happens if you stop that wave and offer a replacement. Or watch the next fight you have with your spouse or children or neighbor. The same principle applies. Harness the positive power in the situation and you may diffuse the negative. You might even have a big effect. You might even find the effect of your action magnified. You might even see fruit grow. You might even start a wave.