

The heart of Christianity, the center of Christian faith is unquestionably a matter of Love. When Jesus was asked about the commandments in Jewish Law, he summarized them as Love God, and Love your neighbor as yourself. At the Last Supper, Maundy Thursday or “Mandate Thursday,” he says, “this is my commandment, that you love one another ... as I have loved you.” And of course it did not start with Jesus... in the Torah, in the book of Leviticus, we should remember Chapter 19 says “You shall love your neighbor as yourself!” ... A few verses further, as is written on the synagogue (corner of Washington and Olive St), the Torah says “The stranger or alien among you shall be to you as a native citizen; you shall love him as yourself, for you were once strangers in Egypt.” We remember that Jesus went even further in the Sermon on the Mount to say that we should love our *enemies* and pray for those who persecute us. Our lectionary readings this morning from John are all about Love, and I think we all love 1 John Chapter 4, verse 7-8, worth repeating again: “Let us love one another for love is of God and he who loves is born of God and knows God. He who does not love does not know God; for GOD IS LOVE.”

Why would Jesus, and his disciples, and our common lectionary keep preaching about Love? Surely it is because we humans have so much trouble loving! In one of the best mini-sermons I ever heard at a wedding, the minister asked, “Why do people cry at weddings?” She then pointed to the fact that there is so little genuine love in this world! And...even if a wedding day is filled with joy for the great music, great food, the smiles and well-wishing, the joy has a shadow of the reality of the world, the reality that even the best relationships will have times of conflict, and times of sadness and loss... No wonder most vows say “for better, for worse, in sickness and in health,” etc... MY favorite wedding sermon to give, that I repeat in varied forms, is to start with perhaps the most famous Bible passage on love by Paul: 1 Corinthians 13 (you all know the beginning I’m

sure... two simple adjectives!)... “Love is patient and kind!... Two simple words, but so hard to live consistently! That’s why Paul goes on to say what Love is not, many things that we all do: Love is not jealous or boastful, not arrogant or rude, not irritable or resentful, does not rejoice at wrong, Love does not insist on its own way!” Yes, we do many of those things! We could spend the whole morning admitting the ways we all fall short of Perfect Love; we say and do many things that love is not! Then, naturally, in the wedding sermon, I usually conclude by speaking of the need for Grace, and Forgiveness, in all loving relationships. Thus the spirit of Jesus Christ can be the glue of Love, since Jesus was all about forgiving and understanding when we fall short, when sin raises its ugly head... when we are not patient and not kind!

Two simple words about Love... It is “patient and kind!” But we always fall short. We know that we get *impatient* often. Maybe it is just a matter of being able to wait for things longer. Being able to delay gratification or not expecting instant gratification, not getting our needs met all the time, learning that we are not the center of the world, learning to wait so that others can get their needs met. We know that some translations of the Bible (KJV)... instead of “patient,” say long suffering! OK, waiting and suffering... Hmm, my dog is now mature enough to often be patient... until I talk a bit too long, and he suffers a little bit too much from lack of exercise, so even he finally jumps up and grabs the leash, to say let’s go! Maybe we should all learn from dogs... be able to “wait patiently” ... for quite awhile!

But naturally we don’t want to confuse this “long suffering” with excessive self-denial called martyrdom, or playing the victim! This interpretation of love is self-deprecating and self-destructive. I’m moving to the next word now, that love is “kind.” Too often we confuse being kind with being “nice.” A talk show guest recently named this problem as especially applicable to women, trying to be too nice, not speaking up, not interrupting, not showing any anger,

etc. So obviously patience and kindness can be taken too far, can be too extreme, which can be self-destructive, like becoming a doormat. The guest on the talk show made the point that showing kindness is more active, such as acts of kindness, whereas “being nice” too often means be quiet, don’t talk back, be subservient.

We don’t need to just take the Bible as our call to Love... We all can think of many songs that call us, urge us to love, and some lyrics ring more true than others.... *What the World Need now is love sweet love.... Don’t go changing, to try to please me, I love you just the way you are! ... One of the memorable lyrics in an old song is “Love is not love until you give it away!”* As a Christian, this last song, seems to say what Jesus was trying to teach. There is a sense that Love becomes fullest when it is an action, not just a feeling. So love must be more than a feeling, and even more than an intention; genuine love may start with intention, but leads to actions. And it surely is more than a feeling if one decides to love and to pray for an enemy.

I feel that I must once more restate the situation, the historical context of the community of John. They were fighting with each other over doctrines about Jesus. They were fighting about how human he was and how divine he was, and who was emphasizing which part. A whole group left the community and did the equivalent of starting a new church. What they forgot in all their debating and fighting was the central message or command of Jesus, *to love one another!* In the second letter of John, he advises his community not even to greet these people who had a different viewpoint. The teachings in John’s letters become very black and white... dividing the world into two kinds of people: those who know God, and those who do not know God! In our little devotional booklet (These Days), Rev. David Cathcart, of the United Church of Canada, echoed what I’ve been saying about the in-fighting in the community of John: Commenting on the phrase “spirit of truth and spirit of error” in 1John4:6, he says: *I am not much comforted by the authors argument in these verses. It*

comes down to “They are wrong because they aren't from God. I am from God, so I am right.” It's not much to go on for genuinely discerning a spirit of truth. Regarding belief, he says: I read “should believe” (1John 3:23) in conjunction with the way the author asks us to LOVE: not in word and speech, but in truth and action. “Believing” in the name of his son Jesus Christ isn't about saying the right words about him, but obeying God's commandments (to love), trusting that God abides in us and that God provides (the means to love) through the Spirit.

We need to be clear that when the Bible uses opposites to teach (as Jesus himself did), it is a rhetorical device, a means of persuasion, but it is not always literally applicable. I do not know of any people who “bear NO fruit” or do not love at all! Most everybody bears *some* fruit, has *some* kindness in them. Rather than put people in categories of good and evil, to deify them or to demonize them, I like the Jewish notion of the impulses in all: an impulse for good and an impulse for evil, and we have some choice over which impulse we feed.

I prefer thinking in terms of transformation... that we all need continual transformation, to grow more into the likeness of God and Jesus. (To me, our final song rings true: “Lord I Want to be a Christian, I want to be *more* loving, *more* holy, *more* like Jesus, in my heart....”) The call is there, to be more loving; and the means is there: connection with Jesus and with the Holy Spirit... since Jesus embodied the love of God, since he was incarnate love, long suffering and kind, compassionate, serving, and sacrificing himself for the sake of others. Using John's metaphor of the Vine: Since we are branches, let us stay connected to the Vine of Perfect Love, which is our risen Christ and his indwelling Holy Spirit. Amen.