

**Love one another**

*Acts 10:44-48; John 15:9-17*

In a week dominated by sad local bereavement for our congregation, to which I add two bereavements in the Presbytery, there may never have been a time when people felt so distant from loving one another because of sadness, yet never more needing to know that we must continue to love one another, despite everything, because of everything.

Grief, and the fear and sense of abandonment that go with it, can be numbing, or raw, or disconcerting, or angering. I sat recently with someone in Church who simply needed to get away from the confines of their home and into another space, but larger, this sanctuary, in the warmth, to take the time to reflect, and weep, and remember, and ask the why, why, why questions.

Preparing this sermon, with my own mind in a thousand and one places, this concept of love, loving one another, abiding in Christ's love, has been both challenging and comforting. In the face of local grief, and national political turmoil, and international devastation, what in God's Name does love really mean? What does it really mean to love one another?

Flippant and glib answers will not do.

Which is why when Jesus uses the word 'love' in our reading this morning there is something challenging and gritty about it. This is not Hallmark card love. What Jesus says to His disciples when it comes to love is that they are to love, 'just as' God loves Jesus, and Jesus loves His friends and disciples. In some instances that will be tough love. Loving people who are difficult to love. Loving people who have let you down, or hurt you, despite what they have done. Loving people who don't want your help but really need it, and we have to hold on until they accept it, or who, by their own efforts and our protective slightly distanced love, move into that space in life where

they have fallen, but are now, just about, able to stand upright again. The love that is strong enough to let people learn from their mistakes, the love that is strong enough not to rush in and fix everything, even when you know better, especially when you know better, is surely one of the most important kinds of love there is.

Of course, love can mean propping up, and mopping up, and carrying where required, and sharing or bearing the burden for a season. But when Jesus tells us to "Love one another", it seems clear to me that there is a mutuality in that loving. Not always an exact balance, but enough of a give and take to show that the love, between partners, parents and children, friends, colleagues at work, even relative strangers, has the kind of texture and resilience and respect that allows for both sides to be themselves, without causing harm, and growing, and moving forward, and healing, and learning to hope again.

Do you know that kind of love, that 'Love one another'? Have you given it, have you been big enough to accept it? It is a big ask, either way.

What I notice also in this 'love one another' passage is the fact that Jesus uses the word, 'abide' four times. What does it mean to 'abide in Jesus?' Abide means to dwell, to stay. If we abide in Jesus we make our home with Him, and we let Jesus make His home with us. It means to feel at home with Jesus. It means to find in the time of grief or turmoil or disappointment or despair or exhaustion a place of rest, a place of friendship, a place of sanctuary.

The rest need not be passive, though sometimes we might simply need that safe place to collapse. For abiding with Jesus also means finding a place of recharging and re-energizing. Abiding in Jesus means finding that place where life has its source and we find the means to be creative, imaginative, strong, focussed again. Abiding in the love of Jesus. Finding that place where we find God opening the door to His heart. Or it may sometimes be that God stands at the door of our

heart and waits to be let in by us. So that we can love one another, Jesus and ourselves. So that we can love one another, ourselves and the people around us, whether those people are there for a reason, or a season, or for all time.

This kind of love stemming from God overflows into our lives and out through our lives. When we live out this kind of generosity of spirit and openness of heart, when we think, speak and act this love, it transforms everything. It transforms the people around us, because it has transformed us. Love one another. Abide in Jesus. Not only show your love to others, but look for it in them, and accept it when it is offered to you.

Some years ago, I remember telling you of the story that is told of a monastery that was on its way to extinction. No one wanted to be a monk anymore, morale was low and the future was bleak. No one who visited the place ever wanted to stay. In desperation the abbot went to see a wise friend, a rabbi, to ask for advice. The rabbi commiserated and shared that nobody wanted to be rabbis anymore either, but as the abbot was leaving, the rabbi said to his friend quietly, "One of you is the Messiah."

The abbot went back and shared the puzzling statement with his monks, who could not think what to make of it. None seemed plausible candidates. They all had flaws and failings. None of them could possibly be the Messiah. But it must be one of them.

As time went by the monks slowly began to look at each other in a new way. They began to see signs of holiness and kindness that had previously escaped their notice. Slowly the gloomy clouds that had hung over the monastery dispersed, and it became a gentler and happier place. A place where love was audible, visible, tangible. People who visited stayed on in the monastery, and the community began to grow again. The clouds kept breaking up and lifting, and the monks and

their visitors saw Christ in everyone. Christ abided with them, and they with Him. They began, intentionally, to love one another, as God loved them.

Love is expressed in affection; love is expressed in tolerance; love is expressed in firmness, for it is a doorway, not a doormat; love is expressed in relationship, and in building community. Love shares its resources, and its material goods. Love is shared where there is physical, emotional and spiritual need. Love is shared amongst friends, and amongst strangers. Love is to be part of the culture of Christianity, of what it means to be a Christian.

There are times when the organ is barely finished playing and we've scarcely made it through to the hall for coffee before some bitter comment, some unkind observation, some ungracious remark passes our lips and the distance between where God's love is, and where we are; and it can be such a distance.

But Jesus doesn't give up on us. His love never gives up, and never lets go. We are His friends, and we need His love, and He needs our love. And there are times when, thank God, we do get it right. The atmosphere in the Church changes as the reality of this all-encompassing love reaches out and embraces us. At baptisms; at Christmas and Easter; at weddings and funerals; when the music that is played to us, or the music that we sing touches somewhere in our lives, deep down, and we find that we are more open to the transformation of His love than we ever realised was possible.

For many these have been hard days. Our own local grief. Our bewilderment at the state of politics in our country. Our sickening at atrocities committed in Israel-Palestine, and Ukraine, and the streets of suburban London, and other places.

*And yet: Love one another, as I have loved you. Abide in my love. You did not choose me, I chose you. This I command you, to love one another.*

However you need to hear this message from Jesus. Wherever in your life you need to apply it. Know today that is spoken to you directly. So that the grief you carry may be comforted by others. The hurt you endure may be shared with others. The loneliness you feel may be noticed by others. The frustration you feel may be soothed by others.

And once you have heard it, and accepted it, share it in your homes, in your church, in your community and country and world. For this is how things will change. Always.

**In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit**

**Amen**