

Sermon

“It Does A Body Good”

July 28th, 2019 ~ First Presbyterian Church

7th Sunday after Pentecost

Based on John 13:31-35 and Ephesians 4:1-16

SCRIPTURE:

John 13:31-35

³¹ When Judas had gone out, Jesus said, “Now the Son of Man has been glorified, and God has been glorified in him. ³²If God has been glorified in him, God will also glorify him in himself and will glorify him at once.³³ Little children, I am with you only a little longer. You will look for me; and as I said to the Jews so now I say to you, ‘Where I am going, you cannot come.’ ³⁴I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. ³⁵By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.” [NRSV]

Ephesians 4:1-16

¹⁴I therefore, the prisoner in the Lord, beg you to lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called, ²with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, ³making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. ⁴There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope of your calling, ⁵one Lord, one faith, one baptism, ⁶one God and Father of all, who is above all and through all and in all. ⁷But each of us was given grace according to the measure of Christ’s gift. ⁸Therefore it is said, “When he ascended on high he made captivity itself a captive; he gave gifts to his people.” ⁹ (When it says, “He ascended,” what does it mean but that he had also descended into the lower parts of the earth? ¹⁰He who descended is the same one who ascended far above all the heavens, so that he might fill all things.) ¹¹The gifts he gave were that some would be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers, ¹²to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, ¹³until all of us come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to maturity, to the measure of the full stature of Christ. ¹⁴We must no longer be children, tossed to and fro and blown about by every wind of doctrine, by people’s trickery, by their craftiness in deceitful scheming. ¹⁵But speaking the truth in love, we must grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, ¹⁶from whom the whole body, joined and knit together by every ligament with which it is equipped, as each part is working properly, promotes the body’s growth in building itself up in love. [NRSV]

OPENING PRAYER: Once again, startle us, O God, with your truth, and open our hearts and our minds to your wondrous love. Speak your word to us; silence in us any voice but your own, and be with us now as we turn our attention, our minds, and our hearts, to you, in Jesus Christ our Lord; and let all God's people say...Amen.

Milk, It Does A Body Good

Growing up in the 1980s and early 1990s, it was common to see milk commercials on TV, particularly after school when advertisements were targeted at kids watching cartoons and other kid-friendly TV shows when they got home in the afternoons. The advertising slogan for milk in that era was “Milk, It Does a Body Good.” And, the commercials might have a girl looking into a mirror while talking to herself, and she sees herself gradually grow up into a beautiful woman with a good-looking boyfriend who was the same dorky boy who grossed her out when he asked her to dance back in middle school. Or, they would feature a boy looking into a mirror while talking to himself, and he sees himself gradually grow up into an athletic, muscular body with a good-looking girlfriend. I can remember watching commercials like that as a young boy and hoping that would happen to me someday. And, I'll bet all kinds of young boys grew up hoping to be like the boys in those commercials—hoping to become “big and strong” or be the handsome guy with the gorgeous girl hanging off his arm. And, the young girls did the same thing, hoping to become the beautiful young woman who had lots of confidence and everything going for her. All we had to do was drink milk! 😊

Why? Because a diet rich in milk has long been promoted as a way for children to build strong bones and muscles, and stave off the harms of osteoporosis in seniors. Proponents of milk have especially noted its healthy content of calcium, potassium, and Vitamin D that gives each of our bodies what it needs to be healthy. “Milk—it does a body good!”

Why Should I Drink Milk (a.k.a. Why Does Jesus Matter)?

Now, I invite you to consider that Paul's letter to the Ephesians is a lot like that old milk advertising campaign. Just like a TV commercial about milk spends 60 seconds or less laying the groundwork for why we should drink milk (because

“it does a body good”), the first three chapters of Ephesians have laid the groundwork for why it matters to be a follower of Jesus Christ. You see, in the chapters and verses prior to our reading today, Paul has been laying out a grand vision of what God has accomplished in Jesus Christ—dealing with the great and eternal truths of our faith, along with the purpose and function of the church—the very body of Christ in the world then, now, and far from now in the future. He’s been writing about how God is at work in the world through Jesus Christ—revealing, choosing, adopting, sacrificing, and blessing persons and communities everywhere in order to bring about a new, unified body of the faithful—one that is knit together by the sacred oneness of God himself, made known to the world in the man, Jesus. And, starting with the first 16 verses of chapter 4, Paul pivots from the grand vision of God’s accomplishments in Christ to answering the inevitable question ... “So what?” What does any of this Jesus stuff matter anyway? In other words, it’s like asking ... so why should I drink milk?

It Does the Body of Christ Good

Well, basically, it comes down to this ... Paul begs us “to lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called”—to lead a life based upon the life of Christ himself, and a calling to be as Christ-like as we possibly can. And, just like milk has all that calcium, potassium, and Vitamin D that does a body good, leading a life based on Jesus Christ has its own special ingredients that does a body good, too—the *body of Christ* that is. Paul paints a wonderful picture of the kind of Christ-like life that people must try to live when they enter the fellowship of the body of Christ, and he begs us to strive for the Christ-like attributes of humility, gentleness, patience, peace, and love—these are the very things that build up the body of Christ; they are the very things that does such a body good. And, just as he similarly wrote in a separate letter to the Corinthians, the greatest of these things is love—it always is when we talk about matters of our faith in, and our following of, Jesus the Christ.

Christian Love is Agape—Radical Love

You know, Christian love was something so new, and it was such a radical idea that Jesus introduced, that the Christian writers in the early church had to

invent a new word for it (or use an unusual Greek word)—*agape*. The real meaning of *agape* is unconquerable benevolence, and it means that if we actually regard people with *agape*, then nothing that they can do or say will make us seek anything but their highest good.

That sounds crazy right, especially in the “us vs. them” world that we live in? But, *agape* means that even if they, whoever “they” may be, hurt us and insult us, then we will never feel anything but kindness towards them—no bitterness, no revenge, no getting even. That quite clearly means that Christian love is not an emotional thing because a natural emotional response to being hurt or insulted is to get angry or sad. Instead, Christian love is the ability to retain unconquerable goodwill towards the unlovely and the unlovable, towards those who do not love us, and even towards those whom we do not like. Because Christian love is not an emotional thing—it’s something much different—it’s something *much better*.

Christian Love is Something That We Do

A long time ago in a different part of my life, I would pretty much only listen to country music. And, one of my favorite country singer/songwriters was Clint Black. He once wrote a song called “Something That We Do.” And, in that song, he writes and sings about how love is many things, but love isn’t something that we find; it isn’t something that we already have; and it isn’t someplace that we fall—rather, love is something that we do. And, he’s completely and totally right—because for Christ-following people of faith, love isn’t something that we find, it isn’t something that we have, and it isn’t someplace that we fall—love is definitely something that we *do*! Because Christian love is not an emotional thing—it’s an action, it’s an act of the will, it’s a deliberate choice to hold something, or someone, other than ourselves in higher regard.

The Love Commandment

It’s essentially what the writer of John’s gospel is getting at when he explains Jesus’ new commandment to love one another—a mutual love that is at the heart of the Christian life—the same Christ-like life and love that Paul is begging us to lead and show in Ephesians. For in John’s gospel, as with Paul’s letters, this type of mutual love takes Jesus as its model—the same Jesus who gave the fullest

possible expression of God’s own love by giving his own life on the cross ... which is another reason why this type of love is way more than a simple feeling. The love of which John speaks (and Paul writes) is more than the warm feeling one has toward another person. It is more than an emotion expressed on Hallmark cards. And, it’s also more than what the other gospel writers mean when they talk about love. You see, John’s gospel is unique. Instead of encouraging the disciples and countless other faithful people to love their neighbors, or even their enemies (people who can be kept at arms-length), as the other gospels do—John focuses the love commandment on the community of the faithful itself ... *love one another*—a task that most often proves to be the most difficult thing Jesus could have asked us to do, and perhaps the very hardest thing that Jesus requires of us in a life of faith!

Bear With One Another in Love

So Paul is not asking the early Christians to feel warmly toward one another. He is asking them, and *us*, to stop standing on the sidelines and get into the game! He is asking them, and *us*, to “do” something. He is asking them, and *us*, to “bear with one another in love”—as in, to sacrifice for the other, and to help carry the other’s burdens if we must. He is asking us to love each other with the love that seeks the well-being of others and is expressed in concrete efforts on their behalf. Because, Christian love—*biblical love*—is not just something that you feel—it is something that you do—it is an action, it is *agape*.

It’s All That Easy, and It’s All That Hard

During a Montreat Youth Conference I attended one summer several years ago, the pastor who preached at the evening worship services repeated a certain phrase numerous times throughout the week—“it’s all that easy, and it’s all that hard”—a perfect sentiment for the kind of life and calling and love that Paul is begging us to embrace.

Because, as Paul reminds us, Christian love is marked by humility, gentleness, patience, and forbearance. Christian love is the glue of any community of God’s children, and it is what knits the body of Christ together. Christian love builds up rather than tears down. And, showing Christian love

means loving with a sense of urgency, and a lack of selfishness, because that is what God and Christ do.

At the end of the day, we don't have to like everybody, but we do have to love them if we're going to continue to take this Jesus-following thing seriously. Yes—it's all that easy, and it's all that hard! And, thankfully, more than anything else, it does a body good!

Thanks be to God. Amen.