

Acts 10:44-47**John 15:9-17****Introduction**

Quite often when I am preparing a sermon my mind goes on a little journey of its own and I find that I am asking all sorts of questions. That was certainly the case when I began to study our Gospel reading in preparation for speaking about it this morning.

Questions like:

How easy do we find it to tell someone we love them?

How easy do we find it to show people we love them?

How do we show people we love them?

Even if we love someone does what we do make them feel loved?

What is love anyway?

The problem with this discourse from John's Gospel, which is one of my favourite passages of scripture, is that it is absolutely packed with meaning. These are Jesus' final words to his followers before he dies and he seems to have so much left to tell them. Our passage this morning seems to be at the absolute heart of what he wants them to know and the legacy he wants to leave them with: which is quite simply the command to 'love each other'; so easy to say and yet often so very difficult to do.

In fact telling someone that I love them is something I have never found easy to do. Saying, "I love you", makes us vulnerable and puts our happiness in another person's hands. It can be easier to try to show someone that we love them but even that is problematic. I find it much easier to show love in practical ways than by being affectionate.

I remember years ago when I worked on night duty in a hospice I lived in a Christian Community and shared a cottage with a couple of doctors I had trained with. They were doing their GP training and when one of them was on call I would take the calls on the cottage phone and send a message on the, very large mobile phone kit, to the doctor out on call. One

Sunday afternoon there was a call from a frantic parent whose little girl with heart disease had collapsed. I had to send the message on to my friend and before she came home I knew the outcome hadn't been good. So I was left with the question, "How do I show here I love her and am here for her?" My response was to make a big pan of hot soup. Another community member simply gave her a big hug; something which, at that time, I found very difficult to do.

That might sound amusing but being able to show people we love them is really important and even more important is enabling them to feel or know that they are loved. This is something we talk about in our marriage

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preparation course and is really important in a marriage because we may think we are showing someone we love them but they might not receive it in that way.

So what does it mean to love someone and how do we do it? Jesus tells his disciples, "As my father has loved me, so have I loved you." Jesus, love for us is shown by his absolute commitment to restoring a relationship with us. It is shown in the lengths he was willing to go to in order to restore that relationship with us. It is shown by the fact that he gave his very self for us. That is the love he is calling us to as his followers. He said, "Greater love has no-one than this that he lay down his life for his friends." This verse was very much misused during the Great War as an incentive to encourage young men to sign up and give their lives fighting for their country.

But it is a very important truth and at its heart it means that someone else's life and well-being is more important to us than our own life and well-being. It means that we are willing to sacrifice ourselves to ensure the good of another. The context into which Jesus spoke these words was on the eve of his death. He had spent the week with his disciples in Jerusalem. He was preparing himself for the most difficult thing he had ever done or would ever expect to do. And his disciples? Well

one of them had agreed to betray him to his enemies, the others were arguing amongst themselves about which of them was considered to be the greatest, they had come together for an important celebration supper yet they all thought that it would be beneath them to carry out the courtesy of washing each other's hot and dirty feet before the meal and one of their leaders was about to deny they even knew him.

This is the setting into which Jesus says to them, "As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Now remain in my love". It doesn't seem to me that there was much love or respect shown around that table as Jesus prepared to take his leave from them.

I looked up the word love in my dictionary and it told me it was: "an intense feeling of deep affection and, a great interest and pleasure in something." It also told me that love is an attitude of the mind; which is, I think the key to how we can possibly love others in the same way that Jesus loved us. In order to love someone we need to value them, to respect them, to care about them. That doesn't sound too difficult but I think that the truth is that for many of us the feelings we have about other people can be little more than indifference or perhaps a mild interest. As Jesus' followers we are called to love each other and that takes an effort of will, a commitment to caring.

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I think I have told you this before but it was a turning point for me in my attitude to others so I am going to tell you again. When I was working in a residential home for retired missionaries there was a member of staff who I found extremely difficult. Almost everything she did or said irritated me and I found it very hard to live and work with her – let alone care about her. Eventually I thought that the only way I would ever manage to get along with this woman was to pray for her. So I did. I began regularly to pray for her in my daily quiet time. I began to bring her concerns and worries to God asking him to help her. Gradually my attitude to her changed.

We would never be bosom buddies because we were so very different but I gradually found that, as I prayed for her, I began to care about her. I began to want things to go alright for her and I began to appreciate her good points and to feel affection for her. This is what happens when we remain in God's love, when we inhabit his love for others we learn it for ourselves. This has changed my life and enabled me to commit to learning to love others as Jesus has loved us.

It isn't easy and it can be costly because caring about what happens to other people can be a drain on our resources, our time and our energy. But it is what we are called to do and to be. Jesus talks about the climate of love between him and his father and the key to loving someone is that we should create a context in which they can learn to love us. It comes from trust and the knowledge that that person has our best interests at the very heart of their being. God has our best interests at the very heart of his being and so he calls us to obey him and show that in the way we live.

Some people have said to me, ' what sort of God insists that we obey him? Surely that is a dictator God who wants to control us.' And I have often had discussions with wedding couples where the bride will say – "I am sorry but I cannot promise to obey you. What sort of relationship is that?" And I point out that the promise to obey comes in the context of the bride groom promising to 'worship' his wife. We can trust Jesus with our lives because he has given his own life totally for us.

He tells his disciples that he has come to bring them freedom and joy – and that is what this obedience to loving brings us freedom and joy. He also tells us that when we obey him by loving others we will bear a fruit that lasts. The sort of fruit that Jesus is talking about is that someone's life or situation or circumstances will be changed because we loved them in the same way that Jesus loved us. Not to dying for them (though some have) but by putting their interests and concerns ahead of our own interests and concerns.

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The sort of fruit that Jesus is talking about is that because of a task we performed, such as setting up a foodbank, a friendship group, taking time to chat to a lonely person on their doorstep – the world became a better place.

Tom Wright describes it this way, "Following Jesus is a personal relationship of love and loyalty to the one who has loved us more than we can begin to imagine. The test of that loyalty is the command, "Love one another".

I want to ask you this morning to take a little time to ask yourself is there someone I know I don't love as Jesus calls me to, that I find hard to love and maybe you could begin praying for them, asking God to show them his love and to let his love flow through you to them.