

Loving One Another

One weekday not too long ago a woman with her baby came to the Wooddale Church offices asking for some help - like money and food. One of our pastors met with her and heard at least part of her story and then stepped out of that office to begin the process of providing some of the help that she requested. Upon returning to the office, she was gone but she had left her baby.

I have long wondered what causes a woman to abandon her baby. For it seems to me that she must have given up hope, that she must be desperate, that she must be convinced that there is absolutely no other alternative available to her.

One of the things that especially impressed me was that when she made the choice to do this, she came to the building with the cross on the top. There must have been something somewhere in her history or background that caused her to know that the building with the cross on the top was a building that had Christians, and Christians are those who love. Christians are the kind of people who would provide for her baby the care that she herself felt she could not give.

I grew up in and around the church and have spent my adult life connected to the church. I will tell you that I am impressed. I have known thousands of Christians nearby and around the world, and I am impressed with the love of those who are the followers of Jesus Christ.

Oh, to be sure, I can tell you the stories that are otherwise. I think I know them as well or better than anyone. Stories of Christians who lie, steal, cheat, and practice sexual immorality. Christians who do one another in. I, like you, have been the victim of Christians who have unkindly or severely criticized or done things inappropriate. But I will tell you that they are the exception.

Overwhelmingly my experience with Christians has been that of love, of patience, of kindness, generosity, forgiveness, and goodness, and I am impressed. I am truly impressed with who Christians are and the way they behave.

That is what Jesus had in mind. Jesus was the greatest gift of love that this world has ever known, but his time here was relatively brief - just 33 years. When he was about to return to the heaven from which he had come; he was concerned that God's love continue to be appropriately represented here on earth and communicated to our human race. So here is what Jesus said in John 13:33-35:

"My children, I will be with you only a little longer. You will look for me, and just as I told the Jews, so I tell you now: Where I am going, you cannot come.

A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another."

Here are two of the eleven times in the New Testament that we as Christians are invited to love one another. What do the rest say?

"Let no doubt remain outstanding, except the continuing debt to love one another." (Romans 13:8)

"Love one another deeply, from the heart." (I Peter 1:22)

"This is the message you heard from the beginning: We should love one another." (I John 3:11)

"And this is his command: to believe in the name of his Son, Jesus Christ, and to love one another as he commanded us." (I John 3:23)

"Dear friends, let us love one another, for love comes from God." (I John 4:7)

"Dear friends, since God so loved us, we also ought to love one another. No one has ever seen God; but if we love one another, God lives in us and his love is made complete in us." (I John 4:11-12)

"I ask that we love one another." (II John verse 5)

So there is no doubt about Jesus' expectation. More than every other place in all the world, where Christians fellowship together, that is the place where the love of God can most and best be seen.

This raises the question of how this actually works. How does this love actually happen? Well, Jesus explained that the way Christians are to love one another is the same as the way that Jesus loved us. "As I have loved you, so you must love one another." In other words, see what he does and then copy that.

When I was in grade school, my family became connected with a student, a college student, who had come to the United States from Syria. Shortly after he arrived, my parents invited

him to our home for dinner. That night my mother went all out. She had her best dishes and silverware and a lace tablecloth on the dining room table, and there sat this young man who barely spoke English and had minimal familiarity with American culture and customs and our family trying to carry on a conversation.

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Toward the end of the meal we were served a large cake, slices of it, that had thick, thick icing on top. My older brothers did something - I take no responsibility for my older brothers or for anything actually that they have ever done - but with the skill of a surgeon they took their knives and sliced between the top of the cake and the bottom of the icing with the intent of eating the icing last – the final taste on the palate. They sliced through carefully with the fork, holding the top of the icing, and moved it over to the side of the plate so that it could be eaten separately. Now that takes skill, and that is actually an acquired skill to be able to do that. Meanwhile, our Syrian guest watched this, took his knife and sliced very carefully all — he’s trying to take this mushy icing and put it over on the side because he was doing what he saw do.

That is what Jesus asks us to do. Look at him, see how he loves, and then do the same thing. He wants us to love the way he loves. He loves us even when we hate him. He is generous to us even when we are greedy. He forgives us when we absolutely do not deserve to be forgiven. He is kind to us when we do not have any kindness coming.

I will tell you, I have watched the way Jesus has operated in the lives of a lot of people; but, of course, most significantly in my own life. What I have seen astounds me. The way he calms my heart when I am scared. The way he takes care of me in issues of health, shelter, money, and clothing. The way he provides for my family. The way he forgives me when I commit a sin and then ask for his forgiveness and then commit the sin again and ask for forgiveness and keep doing it until I am embarrassed – I’m embarrassed to even talk to him about it one more time. He confronts me when I am wrong. He is always there for me. He is never harsh. He is never unkind. He is never vindictive. Even when I treat him poorly, he treats me wonderfully. I am loved and I know it. I know that I am loved and so do you.

If you are a Christian, I cannot imagine that you could help but know that. That Jesus wonderfully, wonderfully loves you. So hear what Jesus says to us, “Love one another. As I have loved you, so love one another.”

As you can look around at other Christians, do not ask, “How would Jesus love her?” Do not ask, “How would Jesus love him?” Ask, “How has Jesus loved me?” The way Jesus has loved you is the way to love one another. Not that we love like crazy. It is that we love like Jesus.

There is another important way for us to love one another and that is to do it for Jesus’ sake. He said, “By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another.” In other words, his reputation is dependent upon the way we treat each other. His reputation depends upon our love of each other.

I heard recently about a series of questions that was asked of the son of the United States Ambassador in-

quiring about his father’s views and opinions about American politics and particularly on American foreign policy. This son repeatedly said that he did not know until the questioner decided that he was being antagonistic, that he was being evasive, and so confronted him about that. He said, “You actually know, but you will not tell.”

The son said, “No, I actually do not know. For understand that my father sits in the Embassy as an Ambassador of the United States of America and specifically as a representative of the President of the United States. It is not his position to express his opinions. It is his position to represent his country and his president.”

In II Corinthians 5:20 we as Christians are described as ambassadors of Jesus Christ. We are Christians. We belong to the Christ, and as Christians, we represent him.

For a number of years I carried a credit card that had embossed on the front ‘Wooddale Church.’ One time I was in a restaurant entertaining a missionary at lunch and at the end of the meal the check came. I put the credit card with the check and the server came a few minutes later and said, “Thank you, Mr. Church. I hope you enjoyed your meal.” So, if you want to know who I am, I am Woody – Woody Church. Whenever I used that credit card, I sought always to be very generous with the tip whether the service was good or not. Actually, the tip had nothing to do with the service. I wanted to be the best tipper of the day because I figured there would be times when there would be a server who would see the Wooddale Church, would see the amount of the tip, and a connection would be made. So the reputation of Wooddale was dependent on the amount that I wrote on the gratuity line.

It’s actually been years since I’ve carried a credit card that has Wooddale Church embossed upon it, but I have concluded that I still need to be very generous with that tip because more than being a representative of Wooddale, I am a representative of Jesus Christ. There may be a server who sees me bow my head and pray before a meal, who walks by and hears Jesus Christ’s name mentioned in conversation, and the reputation of Jesus is dependent upon me – upon my generosity, upon the way I behave, upon what I do. Everything I say and do reflects on Jesus.

In the same way, even if there is another Christian who you do not particularly like, you love that Christian for Jesus’ sake. Even if there is a Christian businessperson that has ripped you off and mistreated you, and it can be proved that it is unfair, you love that person. Love that person for Jesus’ reputation. Even if there is someone in the context of the church that has done things terribly inappropriate, be loving toward that person in order to make Jesus look good.

We all tend to be very protective of our own names and reputations. We are careful how we spin stories to

make ourselves look good, but let us be even more protective of the reputation of Jesus who said, "By this everyone is going to know that you are my disciples, if you love one another." In fact, I will tell you that it is not just proving something to God by the way we love one another, and it is not just proving something to the world by the way we love one another, it is actually showing something to ourselves.

Often I hear people say, "You know, I think I'm a Christian. One time I prayed a prayer to accept Jesus as my Savior and Lord. I think I am a Christian. I think I have passed from death to life, but I am not quite sure. I wish I could have something tangible. Something that I could see that would help me be sure."

Let me read to you the words of I John 3:14, "We know that we have passed from death to life, because we love our brothers. Anyone who does not love remains in death." So every time we love one another we show to ourselves as well that we are disciples of Jesus Christ. In fact, those who love the least loveable are those who are the most obviously Christians.

Now I hope I know what you are thinking. I hope you are thinking that you are loved and that you want to love like Jesus. That you truly want to love other Christians. That you want the church to be the 'lovingest' place in town. That you want to show the whole world that you are a Christian by the way you love other Christians. In fact, I hope that your idea of the very best of the way things could be is that those who are not Christians watch the way we behave toward each other and they are so dazzled, they are so impressed, they are so attracted to that kind of love that they come, not to us, but they come to the Jesus who loved us first and made us able to do this. That is what you are thinking, but you just want to know what to do.

Listen to I John 3:16-17, "This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us. And we ought to lay down our lives for our brothers. If anyone has material possessions and sees his brother in need but has no pity on him, how can the love of God be in him?"

In other words, Christian love for other Christians is doing something, not thinking about it. It is not just planning it. Often it goes far beyond just saying something. It is doing something. If someone has a need, we step up, and we meet that need. If it takes a gift of money, then we give the money. If it takes a sacrifice of our lives, we sacrifice our lives. There are actually places in the world where they do that today. It's pretty unlikely in our country and in our culture that it will go

that far, but certainly we can do the lesser things.

What would some examples be? Well, we can pray for one another. Sooner or later we all face the crises of life and I'll tell you that even if you have never thought very much about having other people pray for you, you sure do when the tough times come. So, when you are in an ambulance with a heart attack and there is the wail of the siren and you are wondering if that is the last sound you will ever hear, or when you have been diagnosed with cancer, or when you have been served divorce papers, or when your company goes into bankruptcy, or when the most important relationships of your life start to crumble around you, or when your worst nightmares come true, that is when you really need and really want the prayers of others. If they love you, they will pray for you.

But others are facing those crises now, and if you

love them, you will pray for them. So here is the deal, instead of me praying for me when I'm up against it and you praying for you when you are up against it, how if we pray for each other when we face the crises of life? That would be loving one another.

Or how about serving one another? There are some interesting social changes at the beginning of the 21st century in this nation. We are in a period of unprecedented prosperity. We have historical lows in unemployment and volunteerism is dropping off dramatically. What we are doing in the midst of prosperity is raising our expectations of the way other people serve us. So, we can be very critical of what other people do that we do not like, but we are reluctant increasingly as a nation to serve other people. So, there are huge shortages of volunteers to serve other people. It is true in churches, it is true in the community, and it is true in this church. People are needed to work in the nursery, teach Sunday school, visit those who are in nursing homes, or drive people to the airport or to doctor's appointments. Remember that we are followers of Jesus Christ who came not to be served but to serve. So the continual question should be not what do I want other people to do, but what am I willing to do. We need to volunteer to serve. This is a way of loving one another. This is being kind to one another.

I remember the story of a man who decided one morning that he was going to take his own life. Before doing it, he resolved that if that day anyone either smiled at him or spoke a kind word to him, he would not commit suicide. Is it not amazing that something so little in kindness toward another person could actually become a matter of life or death?

Or forgiving one another – for it seems to me that

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that is one thing that we as Christians are better at and better prepared to do than anyone else because we understand forgiveness better than anyone else understands forgiveness. What is the worst thing that any Christian has ever done to you? How long ago was it? Who did it? Have you forgiven him? Have you forgiven her? Not because it is deserved. Not because it is requested. Certainly not because it is easy. Not even because you really want to forgive. But do it to be like Jesus. Do it for Jesus' sake. Forgive as you have been forgiven. That is the loving thing to do.

Help one another. I have seen Christians do spectacular things out of love. I have seen Christians sell their possessions and give them to the poor. I have seen Christians build houses for the poor. I have seen Christians invite people to come and stay, even live, in their homes. That I think is kind of a high-risk thing to do. I have seen Christians withstand all kinds of criticism because they have stood up against racism, or they have stood up against the oppression of others. I have seen Christians give money anonymously to those who have a need. They do it through a third party or send cash through the mail or a cashier's check. They do it not because they are going to get a tax deduction; they do it out of Christian love. I've seen Christians do unexpected and radical things like donate kidneys or even yield the right-of-way in the church parking lot. I mean the kind of things that you would never expect for somebody to do. I've seen Christians at their very, very best loving one another. Loving like Jesus.

Maybe you have seen the movie *Paying it Forward*. It is the story of a little boy who, in a school project, is challenged to do something that will change the world. What he decides is that he will do something good and life changing for three people and that when they ask him how they can pay him back he will say, "Don't pay me back, pay it forward and do something good and life changing for three other people."

Now that is a fictional story, but there is a true story. It is the true story of Jesus. Jesus gave his life so that we can have forgiveness of sins and eternity with God. When we turn around with our arms open and say, "Jesus, how can I ever pay you back?" he says, "Don't pay me back, pay it forward. Love one another."

So what is your story? What is your best example? What is your best memory of loving other Christians? Listen to three short stories about Christians loving one another.

Story #1 one is when I was a college student. I attended and volunteered in the youth ministry of a church in Elmhurst, Illinois. I had nothing to do with it, but some adults in that church became deeply concerned for families in that community who had adult children who were severely disabled, mentally, emotionally and/or physically. So they put together a project where they found out who they were and they offered to take their

adult children on an overnight, actually two overnights, field trip to Springfield, Illinois. These Christians would provide all of the care and all of the expenses, even though many of these adults who were disabled required two or three volunteers to care for them, sometimes with high levels of skill. They filled an entire charter bus. I will tell you what touched my heart the most. It was when I found out that some of those parents of adult disabled children that weekend had their first day off from giving care in more than 30 years. Jesus said, "Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another."

Story #2 was right here at Wooddale. A woman came and volunteered to help out. When she was asked, "What do you want to do?" here is what she said, "Put me where no one else wants to be. What is the one thing in the church that nobody else wants to do? That is what I'll do." Wow, she sounds like Jesus. "Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another."

Story #3 is one that touched my life and my family. My wife Charleen's Aunt Lil was orphaned when she was a little girl growing up in New Jersey. When she lost her second parent and had no extended family and no one to turn to, this little girl, I think with her mother's body still in the house, walked out the front door, walked the block to her Sunday school teacher's house, told her what had happened, and asked if she could come live there and if she would be her mother. Her Sunday school teacher, Mrs. Hanson, opened the door, welcomed her in, raised her and became her mother for the rest of her life. I can almost hear Jesus say, "That's it! That's exactly what I had in mind. 'Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another.'"

So look around you. Think of those Christians who are the most loveable and think of those who are the least loveable. Think of them, not yourself. See their needs and meet their needs and love like Jesus. Love for Jesus' sake. Love one another.

Our Father God, you are the best and greatest lover of all. Thank you for loving us through Jesus Christ our Lord. And when we turn and say, "How can we ever pay you back?" you say to us, "Pay it forward. Love one another." May we do it just like Jesus. Amen

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