

Isaiah 43:1-4
John 15:9-17
Text: John 15:17

St. John's Presbyterian Church
Devon, Pennsylvania, 19333
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HOW DO I LOVE THEE . . . ?

I am giving you these commands so that you may love one another *John 15:17*

How do I love thee? Let me count the ways.
I love thee to the depth and breadth and height
My soul can reach, when feeling out of sight
For the ends of being and ideal of grace.

Elizabeth Barrett Browning's father had a love for his daughter that was so jealous and over-protective that when she married Robert Browning in 1845, her father disowned her. Almost weekly, Elizabeth would write letters of the tenderest love and affection to her mother and father asking for a reconciliation. After ten years of letter writing she received her first response from them in the form of a huge box which came in the mail. Opening it, she discovered all of her letters; not one of them had been opened! Today, those love letters are cherished as being among the most beautiful prose in the English language.

In John's Gospel Jesus speaks to the disciples at great length in the upper room on the eve of his death, and what is foremost on his mind is that they should *love one another*.

Our reading from John is at the heart of Jesus' last message, and it begins in a most unusual way for Jesus. He says, "This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you." "As I have loved you"—a learned activity, one cultivated by example. What is unusual is that nowhere else in all the gospels does Jesus *command* the disciples to do anything, using that word.

Life seems to place us between two poles that contend for our allegiance. The one is *competition*, the upward grasping for dominance, control, food, mates, security, space, affection, approval; virtually all of the elements of Maslow's hierarchy. The other pole is *love*, whose highest goal is to aid the other, to give itself away, to give security, affection, space, approval, to release control. Jesus insists that love is the higher, the more lasting, the more productive good.

At the risk of appearing to sound my own horn (I saw this rather as a confirmation of Jesus' teaching), on a trip down I-95 I pulled back on the interstate after a rest stop to find myself edging into a huge traffic jam on the Delaware Turnpike. Everyone was obliged to shift lanes among the sometimes hostile traffic

trying to cram five lanes into one. An eighteen wheeler loomed alongside, not about to give way. Behind that was a white pick-up, a contractor's truck with New York plates, the driver staring resolutely ahead with a white knuckled determination that says, "I haven't seen you, buddy, and even if I have—you're not getting in here!" So I waited, more traffic piling up behind me, more drivers irritated at my complacency, until a young woman, beaming a sympathetic smile, graciously let us in.

Within a hundred yards all the traffic had to jog left again, but the white pick-up got stuck behind the tractor trailer in our former lane. Now I had control of the lane. "Ahaaa!", I thought—"the sweetness of revenge." Should I wave contemptuously as we drifted by? Should I, too, look resolutely ahead, gloating privately? Should I fiddle distractedly with the radio? No, I thought, something larger can come out of such a commonplace thing. The young woman had given me a gift, and I should pass it on. So I eased to a stop and waved him in, something, I suspect, he did not anticipate, and from his vigorous acknowledgment the message in the action seemed to have struck a companionable nerve.

"I give you these commands so that you may love one another." It is a learned thing, this gift of love. But I suspect it is also learned from the essential nature of God in us. For we are all, we recall, made in the image of God.

Love or competitiveness. What do we most teach?

Jim Roberts, a family therapist in Kansas City, did a guest editorial piece on public radio's "All Things Considered" some time ago. He was visiting the fourth-grade class of his son, Daniel, where the teacher had organized a "balloon stomp." Each child had a balloon tied to his or her leg by a foot of loose string, the object being to stomp on everyone else's balloon while protecting your own. As soon as your balloon gets stomped, you're out, and the last child standing with a plump and glistening balloon would have the winner's glory.

As the teacher signaled the children, at least some of the children changed into screaming missiles, homing in on anything remotely inflated and fending off or dodging anyone who attempted to stomp on their balloon. A couple of children who lacked the spirit of this competition stood dismayed and fearful, like lambs conscious of the impending slaughter. In a few seconds, all of the balloons were burst except the bright, bouncing trophy of one exultant child.

Then an unnerving thing happened. Another class, this time a class of mentally challenged children, was brought in and prepared to play the same game. Balloons were attached to their ankles and they were briefed on the rules of the game. Roberts said, "I got a sinking feeling in my mid-section. I wanted to spare these kids the pressure of the competitive brawl."

They had only the foggiest notion of what this was about. Then, after some

moments of hesitation and blank confusion, the idea got across to the children that the balloons were supposed to be stomped. But as the game got underway it was clear these kids missed the spirit of it. They walked about methodically inviting others to stomp on their balloons. One girl carefully held her balloon in place so that a boy could stomp on it. Then he did the same for her. When all the balloons were gone, the entire class cheered in unison.

In the original game only one child could win. In the second class, all the children won and shared in the joy of it.

"I give you these commands," said Jesus, "so that you may love one another." Jesus did not relate the kingdom of God to a market economy in which only the fit, the aggressive, survive and are approved. He said, rather, love one another as I have loved you. And he also gave us the capacity to love like that, reminding us that we "may" love like that. This is the real measure of our success.

Amen.