

John 15: 9-17
Creekside COB
May 17, 2009

“Love... Or Else!”

In the sixth century B. C. there lived a man who loved to tell stories, especially for children. Many of them were about animals and their *“creaturely”* behavior that is expressed in our own behavior, and each of his stories contained a simple lesson or moral. His name was Aesop, and Aesop’s Fables are told to this day. He was a keen observer of human nature, and there is one quote of Aesop’s I remember well. *“When all is said and done, more is said than done.”*

C. S. Lewis’s book, *The Screwtape Letters*, is a conversation between Screwtape, a mid-level management devil, and an apprentice devil. Screwtape tells his little minion that the most effective tool for weakening Christianity is words. “Get them to talk about their religion. The more they talk, the more they will convince themselves that they are actually putting their faith into practice.”

Christianity is not a doctrine, a code of ethics, a code of behavior, a system of beliefs or an intellectual exercise. It is a practice. Doctors practice medicine. Lawyers practice law. Psychologists practice, chiropractors practice, and Christians practice or embody the Christian message. We practice obedience to Jesus, and we must practice, practice, practice all our lives knowing that alone we’ll never get it right.

Chapters 14 through 17 in John’s gospel are Jesus’ farewell to the disciples. They are together in the upper room, sitting in the flickering light of oil lamps. Jesus has washed their feet and shared the Passover meal with them. He knows they will not be together in the same way again. It isn’t easy reading because Jesus’ is so patient and ponderous and redundant, saying the

same thing several ways to leave no doubt in their minds what he expects from them after he is gone.

Jesus tells the disciples, *“As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Keep my commandments and abide in my love as I have kept my Father’s commandments and abide in his love.”* The way he describes the disciple’s connectedness to Jesus and God sound to me a little like the cadence of a verse from a Beate’s song: *“I am he as you are he as you are me and we are all together.”*

Last Sunday Betty Kelsey talked about God’s *“grape expectations”* of Christian productivity. Fulfilling our God-given purpose means abiding relationship with Jesus. The branch connected with the vine will blossom and flourish. The branch severed from it will wither and perish. We have two choices. Life lived in the context of a loving, growing relationship with Jesus and other people produce abundance and joy. Left to our own devices, we die. There are only two options. There are only the paths you can go by. We either love, or die.

Some of our Sunday school classes have read Brennan Manning’s book, *The Ragamuffin Gospel*. Manning tells the story of an Irish priest taking a walking tour of his parish. On the road ahead he sees an old peasant kneeling beside the road praying. The priest is moved by this display of piety and says to the man, *“You must be very close to God.”* The peasant looks up at the priest, reflects for a moment and says, *“Yes, he is very fond of me.”*

The old peasant didn’t have an inflated ego. His answer was evidence of a trusting, intimate relationship with God. People who learn to see themselves as God sees them aren’t fixed on their flaws and failures. Only the person who sees himself as God saw him -- a child of God in need of grace and guidance.

Karl Barth was perhaps the most influential theologian of the twentieth century. He wrote a massive twelve-volume treatise

called, *Church Dogmatics*. At a meeting of theologians, scholars and seminary students at Princeton University in 1961, a reporter from the New York Times asked Barth to summarize his vast thinking in *Church Dogmatics* in a single sentence. He replied, “*Jesus loves me this I know, for the Bible tells me so.*”

As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. We hear the words and nod. “Yes, if I know anything, I know that.” I’m here to say, “You don’t!” Unfortunately, few of us have been converted to our core and become enthralled with the realization that Jesus loves us. We’ve been brainwashed into believing people get what they deserve, which doesn’t permit us to believe that Jesus loves us, without condition or reservation. God’s love is like a Trojan horse. It looks like love on the outside, but inside is judgment and punishment. Inside someone is at a calculator keeping track of all the ways we screw up.

Brennan Manning is flabbergasted by the widespread refusal to think big about a loving God. He says, “Like nervous thoroughbreds being guided to the starting gate at Churchill Downs, many Christians bray, bridle, and bolt at the revelation of God’s all-embracing love in Jesus Christ.” (*Ragamuffin Gospel*, p. 36)

Every Sunday we recite the beautiful story of Jesus and his love. What a shame that we cover our ears. Nobody should get to leave church without being told they are loved by Jesus all they days of their lives. God has granted us the freedom to bow before his fierce love, or not. We have our reasons for not responding. Maybe we know that believing such a thing will make us go into the deep end of the pool where we are in over our heads.

“*As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you.*” Someone suggested that we are wary of Jesus’ love because of the way God loved Jesus. Jesus received peace and strength from his connection with God, but consider what else God’s love got him. God sent him from the habitations of heaven into life on earth as a baby where he was nearly killed by Herod. God drove Jesus into the wilderness where Satan worked 40 days to make Jesus

come unraveled. God loved him into butting heads with pious Pharisees and the heads of religion and government. God loved Jesus enough to give him twelve numbskulls that consistently missed his message and were afraid of their own shadows. God loved Jesus so much that he sent him a constant stream of sick, broken and poor people at all hours of the day and night. God loved him all right, and we know the terrible way it ended.

It would have been nice had Jesus said, “The way God has loved me is far as it goes. I’ll love you by encasing you in a protective bubble.” But that’s not how it works. Letting Jesus love you is dangerous. Let him love you and you will stop playing the games everyone else is playing. No more king of the hill. No more chasing the biggest, the best, or the most. Let him love you and you’ll end up in serving people in places you would never pick for yourself.

Of course you know, don’t you that you can’t pull it off? You can’t do what he asks of you. It’s too big. There’s no way to do it, but Jesus tells you to do it anyway. Jesus did something to help us. Jesus befriended us. “You are no longer servants. I’ve called you friends because what I received from God I’ve passed along to you.”

It’s amazing that Jesus would want to make friends of his disciples, considering they ran for the exits when he needed them most. With friends like them, Jesus hardly needed enemies. They did nothing to earn his friendship. Notice that Jesus said, “I’ve *called* you friends.” He made it happen, the way God turned chaos into creation; the way he turned us from no people to his people. In Jesus we have a friend who shows us how to love God and be loved by God.

Brennan Manning says, “There is only one thing God asks of us -- that we be people who live close to God, people for whom God is everything and for whom God is enough.”

Every Tuesday for fourteen weeks, Mitch Albon, a sports writer for the Detroit Free Press, spent the afternoon interviewing his favorite college professor, Morrie. There was urgency in their

conversations because Morrie was dying from Lou Gehrig's disease. They talked about the things that make life special and give it meaning, and near the end Morrie spoke earnestly about what is most important. He was moved by a poem by W. H. Auden that said, "We must love one another or die." Morrie wasn't afraid of death nor did he worry over questions about the afterlife. The one thing he wanted to do was tell the world what's most important, and do it through Mitch's writing. "Tell them that when love abounds there is no higher sense of fulfillment, and without it, you're dead. There are only two paths to choose... love, or perish."

In his book, *Call to Conversion*, Jim Wallis recalls a conference he attended in New York City. It was about the church and social justice and was attended by theologians, pastors, priests, nuns and lay church leaders. During one session a Native American stood, looked out over the mostly white audience and said, "Regardless of what the New Testament says, most Christians are individualists with no real experience of community." He paused and continued, "*Let's pretend that you were all Christians. If you were Christians you would no longer accumulate. You would share everything you had. You would actually love one another. And you would treat each other as if you were family.*" He paused again, and with piercing look said, "*Why don't you do that? Why don't you live that way?*"

Let's pretend that we are all Christians. Let's pretend that you believe and I believe Jesus loves us as God loved him. Let's pretend that he has made us his friends, regardless of how much we talk and how poorly we have performed. Let's pretend that he wants us to abide in him and bear fruit. Let's pretend to take Jesus literally and "*Love one another.*" Let's pretend there are just two paths to go by -- to live and love as he did, or else.