



Love Each Other: John 15: 9-17
Sermon by Deacon Heather Feltman
Bethlehem Lutheran Church, St. Charles
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I want to begin with a story this morning. Quite a few years ago, I was driving along Santa Monica Blvd. with a friend after an evening graduate class at UCLA. She actually was more than a friend. This dynamic and gracious woman was in a way a minister to me. I have been so blessed by seeming to find wonderful women who have been like ministers to me throughout my life and she was definitely one of them!

As we drove along on our way back to my condo, we volleyed concepts and ideas about the class back and forth with each other. It was a casual weeknight class, so my friend had on a pink sweat suit with matching pink tennis shoes. All the rage that year was for decoration on one's apparel. Her tennis shoes were a marvel – hand-painted, with stars applied upon them. Way out of my league! I remember glancing down more than once at my scuffed up white canvas Keds as I noted in awe the artwork on her feet!

I remember us stopping at a street crossing, and all of a sudden, we both fell silent. A woman was passing who could have been our age or older, no good way to tell. She shuffled across at the light, her hair plastered to her skull, her clothes mismatched. She was pushing a shopping cart filled with all her belongings. She was barefoot. My friend stopped the car. "Be right back!" she said. My friend leapt out into the rain, ran through the puddles, and standing right there, took off her own hand-painted, star applied pink tennis shoes, and held them out to the homeless woman.

The woman hesitated for a moment, then grabbed them and held them to her chest. Then she reached out to my friend. I was thinking she was either going to attack her or embrace her. But no, she was merely steadying herself with a hand on my friend's shoulder, as she slowly put on first one shoe and then the other. She stamped her feet into the puddles to see if the shoes fit. They did! She either

grimaced or smiled, I could not tell which. Then she walked off into the night with a wave of her hand to my friend.

My friend ran back to the car. Her own hair was plastered to her skull. She was wet and shivering. And I remember that she then looked over at me and I will never forget her words, “There but for the grace of God go I, you know Jesus wants us to love each other.”

I think I murmured back something like, “Yeah, yeah, Jesus does.” Still trying to get a handle on what I had just witnessed. She then pumped the gas pedal with her wet, bare foot and we drove on.

Love each other. Later today, or later this week, I invite you to read through chapters 13-17 of the gospel of John; and listen to Jesus speak. It is Jesus’ long conversation with his disciples on the eve of his death, and if there is one truth that Jesus makes abundantly clear it is that Jesus loves them. Jesus washes their feet, Jesus shows them himself as the only way to heaven, Jesus promises them peace in a world that will hate them; and says that the connection between him and them is so close, it is like a vine and its branches.

Our lives, our actions, our love carry and reveal the presence of divine love. Jesus does not give us something, Jesus says we ARE something. We are made in the image of the First Lover, the divine one, who brought this whole shebang into being. We are the gift. We are the connection. And it happens right here and now – not in some far-off time and place. Abiding Jesus calls it – staying put – Jesus and God have come to us and have made their home with us!

You know abiding seems to involve becoming part of a large extended family, and a holy one at that! When God and Jesus move in with us, they make lots of keys – keys for the Holy Spirit, keys for other disciples, and keys for all kinds of cousins in Christ. Coming and going, we learn to recognize each other, and to call upon each other for everything that people who live together do.

Listen to what Jesus tells the disciples –what Jesus is telling you and me in today’s gospel:

1. I love you with the same love that the Father loves me. You have what I have.
2. I give to you the joy that my Father and I share. You are a part of us.
3. You are my joy, my life, and my purpose!

4. I want your joy to be full, complete, and whole!
5. You are my friends, my peers, my equals.
6. I have told you everything. Nothing is held back or kept secret.
7. I chose you. I picked you. I wanted you.
8. I appointed, ordained, commissioned, and sent you to bear fruit, to love one another. I trust and believe you can do this.

As Jesus fast approaches his impending death, we learn that the imminence of death is indeed sacred ground, and in those moments, we cling to last words in hopes of gleaning some meaning, some promise, some legacy. Every transition, every transformation, is a death of sorts, as well as a new birth.

For something new to be fully born, something old must die. It is the way of the cosmos! Even the transitions we welcome can be bittersweet.

Having launched an adult child, as many of you have, I think back on the series of last words with which we bombarded them—like before that first walk into the school building or onto the school bus, or how about that first time before driving the car alone, or before that first date, or before going off to college, or their first paying job! When I think back on these times, I most confess I seemed to have a lot to say 😊

But dying words are in a league of their own. If you have a chance to say just a few last words, to whom would they be said? And what would they be?

I am imagining that somewhere in those last words there might be an emotional "I love you, or I am sorry" as well as maybe a sincere request like "take care of your siblings," or "live your life!"

Chapters 13-17 of John's gospel are *Jesus'* earthly last words to his disciples as Jesus prepares them for a major transition. Something new is about to be born, namely, the ministry of the disciples and the Christian church.

In this holy ground context, Jesus says, "As the Father has loved me, so I love you, and so you should love one another." What is it that matters when all else, including life itself, is said and done? What is the most compelling, the most powerful, the most enduring force in all the cosmos? What, as we prepare both for living *and* dying, becomes our echoing refrain? *Love*. It is love.

Jesus is commending his followers to agape love, that unconditional, self-sacrificing love that Jesus modeled for us during his time here on earth.

How does one measure such love? Jesus says, "There is no greater love than this, than to lay down one's life for one's friends." Wow, last words matter. They are precious. And of all that Jesus might have said, Jesus chooses love; Jesus chooses relationship.

This type of love makes it possible to disagree on a bedrock of convictions and yet stay in relationship.

As followers of Jesus, we must know, and begin to trust, that this love that Jesus is inviting us into can survive meaningful disagreements, varying political affiliations, the color of our skin, and where we happened to be born. This union can endure and must endure. When Jesus talks about love, Jesus is talking about a way of life.

If we can trust that God is working through us toward some common good, whether we like each other or not, then we can be siblings in Christ, even when we want to fight like heck with each other!

As the Episcopal Bishop Michael Curry says, "Let's stop worrying about whether we like each other and choose to believe instead that we are capable of doing good together!"

That doesn't solve all our problems, not by far, but it least gets us in the starting gate! It gets us unstuck. It is how us humans can live together in profound difference. It's the start of an *e pluribus unum*—out of many, one—that allows and creates space for everybody.

I pray that you will recognize that this love Jesus is calling us into is the most powerful force for changing the world around us. We live in scary and uncertain times, people are hurting, and we keep hurting each other. But anger is not the key; revenge is not the answer; the love and power of God is the key to our hope and to our future. We have to start somewhere, and God wants us to have life as God intended – and Jesus is telling us that the way to living this life is through loving each other.

"As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you." It is your name God whispers before you were formed in your mamma's womb, your name whispered by God

in the waters of baptism, around the altar, in the Word, and in the fellowship of Christ's people.

It is *your* name, no matter how far you may wander, that if you pause to listen you will always hear. "Listen to me, beloved. I love you. I always will. And now your only job is to share that love."

Share this love just as my friend did those so many years ago along Santa Monica Blvd – what might seem like an inconsequential gift of painted shoes for a pair of cold, wet feet. She offered them in Christian love – and thus, the light of God's love shown bright on that rainy, dark night and reminds us –it reminded me of the ongoing presence of God's work in the world!

God is not finished with us yet – so don't give up on love. Listen to it. Trust it. Give into it. Obey it. Love can help and heal like nothing else can. Love can lift up and liberate like nothing else will.

May God hold us all in those almighty hands of love.
Thanks be to God!

Amen.