



# Lexington Presbyterian Church

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## Blessing

John 15:9-17

A sermon by William M. Klein

24 May 2020

9 As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love. 10 If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commandments and abide in his love. 11 I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete. 12 "This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. 13 No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends. 14 You are my friends if you do what I command you. 15 I do not call you servants any longer, because the servant does not know what the master is doing; but I have called you friends, because I have made known to you everything that I have heard from my Father. 16 You did not choose me but I chose you. And I appointed you to go and bear fruit, fruit that will last, so that the Father will give you whatever you ask him in my name. 17 I am giving you these commands so that you may love one another. (Jn. 15:9-17 NRSV)

1

Al Winn, who now resides in the church triumphant, was a Presbyterian pastor, writer, teacher, and former Moderator of the Presbyterian Church. He once suggested that two questions ought to be asked as a part of an ordination service. I think the two questions would be good to ask as part of baptism, confirmation, profession of faith, marriage, or ordination.

The first question is: **Do you know God has loved you?** Have you sensed the sweep and wonder of what happened in Jesus – that God stood in your shoes, that he did not point you out as guilty (which he had every right to do), but identified with you in your guilt?

The second question is this: **Are you trying to find God so you can love him back?** Because if you are, don't look for him to appear to you in some angelic, spiritual form. He will appear to you in "us" – and in those with whom you live and work. God will set himself before you in the stubborn person who until two months ago sat beside you on the church pew, the meddlesome neighbor, the spoiled child, and the disagreeable office worker. If you cannot see God in the face of your neighbor and learn to love that neighbor, then you do not understand God's love for you.

1 John 4:20 reads, "Those who do not love a brother or sister whom they have seen, cannot love God whom they have not seen." But if you truly understand God's love for you, you will learn to love God back by loving one another.<sup>1</sup>

Al Winn proposed two good questions, didn't he...because no matter how many subtle and overt ways we try to say love is just one piece of what it means to be a follower of Jesus...our love one for another is the very heart of what it means to be Christian. To put the matter as bluntly as I did in last Sunday's sermon – **if we really love Jesus then we love one another...and if we do not love one another then we don't really love him at all...and we are not Christian.** Loving each other is our way of demonstrating we realize we have been loved by God and that we want to love God back.<sup>2</sup>

Theophanes the Recluse, a Russian Orthodox saint who lived in the 1800s, once said, "Most people are like a shaving of wood which is curled around its central emptiness."<sup>3</sup> If you let that insight sink in you realize he was right. Too often we focus upon ourselves...upon accumulating experiences, honors, pleasures...upon getting our way. The ironic thing is that such a focus does not produce the happiness or contentment or fulfillment we think we want...does it? And rarely does such a focus have much to do with loving God or one another. Instead, we experience a nagging sense we are empty and unfulfilled. We have the sense we are like a shaving of wood which is curled around nothing but empty space.

George MacDonald, the wonderful Scottish pastor and writer of the 19th century you've heard me mention so many times, said, "The love of one's neighbor is the only door out of the dungeon of the self." Reaching out in genuine interest, concern, and compassion fills our emptiness. Love permits us to understand one of the deepest needs we have...the need Jesus understood so well...the need to be in relationship with God and one another.

Occasionally someone says to me, "You can be loving without being a person of faith." I usually respond by saying, "yes and no." I have no doubt people can love without modeling their love after Jesus. But I firmly believe that without Jesus as our example there is a huge chance that when we use the word "love" or say "I love you," we say it with a huge "I" and a very small "you." We put ourselves at the center of love.

Jesus' love for us was not with "I" at the center. His love was of a type that went deep. His love went as far as laying down his life. Such love is the type of love Jesus expressed for his friends - and for each of you. And if we love as Jesus loved then we can love in ways that will promote life... abundant life...even when it hurts.

2

A few moments ago we all participated in the baptism of Quinn Melvin. As a part of that service I said, "See what love the Father has for us that we should be called children of God...and so we are. Therefore, I declare that this child's name shall no longer simply be Quinn Melvin. He is child of God. He is Christian."

See what love the Father has for us... How many times have I said and thought these words these last 25 years...about wee children...and about young people...and about youth going through Confirmation...and about couples I've married...and about people I've visited and counseled...and about Ruling Elders who have been willing to carry the heavy load as the Session of this church...and about people dear to us I have commended to the hands of Almighty God at gravesides. "See what love the Father has for us...that we should be called children of God...and so we are." And so we shall be.

As you who are a part of Lexington Presbyterian know, Deb and I will be retiring next Sunday. I could talk a good while about how these 25 years have been such a blessing to me...to us. Both of our hearts are full of gratitude and fond memories.

But the passage from John's gospel encourages me not to focus unduly upon myself...to focus instead upon you...upon the gratitude I have for the many, many ways in which the love of Christ has been at work in you. The love of Christ at work in your lives has been a blessing to me and to Deb...to my children. The love of Christ at work in your lives has been and will be a blessing to one another, to the wider community, and to generations yet to be born.

2

If you've been around here long enough you will remember that the sanctuary burned 20 years ago this coming July 18. Church members and what looked like every person for miles around stood out on the streets and watched as flames engulfed this old building. I was amazed back then that people in foreign lands could watch the video footage through the News Gazette. If the fire were to happen today, anybody who wanted to on the planet could Zoom in.

Thirty months later the sanctuary was rebuilt and we were ready to return to the sanctuary. During those many months "in Exile" (as Bill McCorkle described it), we were buoyed by the conviction that we were being led, cared for, comforted, and challenged by God. We believed and felt that at the time...and really believed and felt it in hindsight.

Twenty years ago as we stood on the streets of Lexington and watched fire consume the sanctuary, we had no clear idea what the future held, what God had in store, how God would lead us...and that was hard because we wanted to know. But God sustained us. Thanks to God for the assurance his generous and providential care was and is and will be new every morning and will forever be as sure as the sunrise.

3

Today you and I stand at a different frontier. Thankfully we are not having to make sense of a devastating fire. But a complete change in pastoral leadership is very disruptive. It is disruptive for you and it is for Deb and me. Adding to that the awkwardness of social distancing and virtual worship makes things even more unsettling. And add to that a cultural, economic, and political divide in our country, our community, and even in our church that gets more polarized, vitriolic, and unloving every day.

As grim as it feels...do not forget that God is busy doing what God does every day...that is, calling us to take a step toward a new and hopefully deeper level of faithfulness. If we are paying attention, we will not forget where we have been and how God supported us...nor will we forget to keep an eye out for how God will love us and support us into the future.

As the Israelites stood at the edge of the Promised Land, Moses addressed the people who had spent 40 years in the wilderness. He wanted them to remember their wilderness experience was a time to prepare for what was to come...and also to remember they really were adequately prepared.

In like fashion, I urge you to face this new era in the life of this church committed to playing an active role. You know what God has been doing here. Be open to the work God has in mind to do in and through you next.

4

What do these musings have to do with the love of Christ? As you move ahead I want you to commit yourselves anew to allow your dealings with each other bear the stamp of God's love. Let the life of this church, the way you navigate the current pandemic, the way you deal with one another, the way you embrace a new day...let all of this cause each of you to conclude God's love is real and present...as real and present as this child we baptized today.

Let your words, your deeds, your attitudes, your decisions help people see what love God has for us...that we should be called children of God...and so we are. Let God's

3

love for you and your love for others not be a meaningless word your say and forget...but permit God's love to be your actual sign and seal.

As you seek to embody the love of God, though, you do not have to do it on your own. Be comforted yet again, not by your ability to be loving, but by God's. Never forget that God stands above the trials you may face and the complexities of life with wisdom to guide you, strength to protect you, and love to keep you. His boundless and creative love supports you whether you sense it or not. With a surging fullness God is forever moving toward you, seeking to fill your life with the capacity and desire to love as he loves you.<sup>4</sup>



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### Endnotes:

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<sup>1</sup> Gill, Theodore A. ed. 1973. To God Be the Glory. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 127. Quoting Albert Curry Winn, *The Plainest and Simplest Thing in the World*.

<sup>2</sup> Black, C. Clifton. 1998. 1 John. *The New Interpreter's Bible*, Vol. XII. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 430.

<sup>3</sup> Bloom, Anthony. 1970. Beginning to Pray. NY: Paulist Press, 70.

<sup>4</sup> King, Martin L. Jr. 1963. Strength to Love. Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 124.