

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord Jesus Christ!

There have been songs and books written about love, movies about love, paintings showing love, poems composed about love. Lives dedicated to love, lives lost because of love, all in the name of love. And all these things barely scratch the surface of what love really is.

Because the truth is, whatever songs and books have been written, movies made, paintings painted, poems composed, lives dedicated or lost to love, there is much more to come because love never ends.

This morning we hear a new commandment: "Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples if you have love for one another." Our Lord said this on the evening before the crucifixion, following "Now the Son of Man has been glorified..." and Jesus is looking death in the face because he loves us and was willing to die for us.

Jesus who became flesh, leaving heaven, coming to earth, born of a virgin, voluntarily gave up his life, he died, for us. He chose to die for us that we might be reconciled to the Father through his action. And the message to you and me is to live and to love as he lived and as he loved. To love those who are hard to love, to love our brothers and sisters in Christ just as Jesus loved us. So as you sit here this morning, take a moment to look around you, who is sitting in front of you, behind you, or on either side of you, yes, you're called to love those people, including those on the other side of the aisle, way in the back or way in the front. People who may be like you, perhaps aren't, different views of life, those who want better health insurance, those who don't, those who are going to vote for someone different from the person you're going to vote for, those who live on the lake, those who live in the country or those who live in town.

We are to love each other, whether we're friends or not, whether we only have a nodding acquaintance with someone, or whether we've known someone for a lifetime and don't really like that person. We are to love 'til it hurts and then to love even more, to love sacrificially, not just sharing with those we like, or from whom we can benefit, but with everyone. Everyone. Think of what happens on this night when Jesus and the eleven remaining disciples go to the Garden of Gethsemane and there Judas comes with temple guards, and greets Jesus with a kiss, the kiss of death. Yet Jesus still loved him.

When you give something to help the needy, what do you give? Just things you can no longer use or that no longer fit? How much do you keep on the off chance that you might wear it again, or because you're going to lose weight, or because it has sentimental value. Have you ever considered that often times we give of ourselves only after we have taken care of ourselves first. Christ gave unlimited love past the point where it hurt. Our love is often limited by selfish, greedy desires and wants that we call needs to camouflage our motivation from ourselves.

We're concerned about our national debt, our debt, inflation, deflation, telling ourselves we are being prudent in our selfishness, holding on to what we can, grabbing more. And we don't realize that our greed and self-centeredness is why we're in the shape we're in. We limit our love, and with economic and political uncertainty, we justify limiting our love.

But hear me now brothers and sisters, Christ commands us to love as he has loved us, to love without limit. Because when we love sacrificially as Christ has loved, limitations, including the limitation of death, are removed. Martin Luther King once said "If you do not have something worth dying for, then your life is not worth living." Our Lord Jesus said "Greater love has no one that this, to lay down one's life for his friends."

I tell you there is nothing in existence worth more than the love of God, love that has been unceasingly poured into us, that we might love with the very love we ourselves have first received from God. Death cannot limit this kind of love, because as we know from the Easter story, the darkest hour is before the dawn, and the glory of the resurrection lightens our darkness. We know in our hearts that there is joy and hope beyond our trials and tribulations, beyond pain and despair, beyond grief. Joy and hope that is the unlimited love of Christ.

Keep in your hearts and minds my friends that the love with which we love one another, even here in this sanctuary, is the test of discipleship. "By this" (your love for one another) Jesus tells us, everyone will know that you are my disciples if you have love for one another." Jesus didn't limit his love and he does not permit us to limit our love either. No ifs, no buts, simple love without limit as Christ has loved us.

AMEN