

“Love One Another,” John 15:9-17 (Easter Sunday, April 16, 2017)

As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Abide in my love. <sup>10</sup> 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. <sup>11</sup> These things I have spoken to you, that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be full.

<sup>12</sup> “This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. <sup>13</sup> Greater love has no one than this, that someone lay down his life for his friends. <sup>14</sup> You are my friends if you do what I command you. <sup>15</sup> No longer do I call you servants, for the servant does not know what his master is doing; but I have called you friends, for all that I have heard from my Father I have made known to you. <sup>16</sup> You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you that you should go and bear fruit and that your fruit should abide, so that whatever you ask the Father in my name, he may give it to you. <sup>17</sup> These things I command you, so that you will love one another.

## PRAY

In our text for today the word “love,” or some variation of the word “love,” is used nine times. Love is the theme of these verses, and if you’ve been here on Sundays while we’ve studied John’s gospel over the course of this spring then you know it’s been the theme of a lot of this book. We’ve talked about love often.

But I’m certainly glad that we get to talk about love on Easter Sunday, because nothing is closer to the heart of God than love. Some theologians like to debate about what’s more central to God: his love or his holiness? So they do this dueling Bible verses thing where some bring out the verse that says, “God is love ...” 1 John 4:16. Others bring out Isaiah 6:3, where the cherubim cry out, “Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of hosts ...”

Which is more central? God’s holiness or God’s love? And the answer I think is that it is God’s love that makes him so holy, so different, so set apart from everything else in creation, so wonderful.

It’s the love of the God of the Bible shown in Jesus Christ that I want to talk to you about this morning, and I’ll break what I plan to say down into two parts: *first, love means acceptance. Second, love is received through obedience.* You might think about it like this: if you’re here this Easter morning and you claim to be a Christian, then I really want you to hear the first point. It’s not that I don’t want you to hear the second, but I really want you to focus on the first. And if you’re here this morning and you’re not a Christian, you don’t follow Jesus, or you aren’t sure if you follow Jesus, I really want you to listen to the second point.

First, love means acceptance. Jesus in our text for today (and indeed in all of chapters 13-17 of the Gospel of John, which the scholars call the Upper Room Discourse) is talking to the eleven disciples (Judas has already gone out from them, bent on betraying

Jesus). And he says in verse 9: “As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Abide in my love.”

Jesus loves the disciples. That sounds like a non-controversial statement, until you remember who the disciples were. We don’t know a lot about several of the disciples, and we know just about nothing of a few, but we do know they were far from perfect men.

We know from Luke 22 that all the disciples were squabbling and fighting on this very night at the last supper about who was the greatest among them – who should have the place of honor. Another disciple was named Simon the Zealot, which meant he was part of a political party made up of Jewish nationalists who wanted to kill the Roman occupiers. Meanwhile another disciple, Matthew, was a tax collector for the Romans, a collaborator with them. So you know Jesus was doing good just to keep those two from killing each other. Thomas, a third disciple, in just a few days would publically doubt whether or not Jesus really came back from the dead. Two disciples who were brothers, James and John, at one point are insulted when a Samaritan village doesn’t welcome them, so they go to Jesus and say, “Do you want us to call down fire from heaven to destroy them?” and Jesus has to tell them to chill out. And then of course there’s Peter, who’s always opening his big mouth and saying foolish things and who would ultimately deny Jesus three times.

It’s this motley crew that made up Jesus’ disciples. They had very rough edges. They weren’t perfect; they needed to change. If Jesus did roll his eyes (I’m not sure you can roll your eyes without sinning, but if you could do that), you know he had to roll his eyes at them. We read that Jesus does get frustrated with them, he tells them when they are wrong, and he rebukes them from time to time because they don’t listen or fail to understand.

Yet ... Jesus loved them. They were constantly screwing up, constantly getting things wrong, constantly being judgmental, yet he loved them. Another way to put it: even though the disciples were incredibly flawed, Jesus was intimate with them.

A couple of weeks ago the investigative journalism podcast “S-Town” was released on iTunes. It is currently the most downloaded podcast of all time. I listened to it; I’m not recommending it because the subject matter is not for everyone and at times the language is very offensive, but I listened to it and enjoyed it. In one episode one of the subjects in the podcast talks about intimacy, the kind of intimacy he had with another subject in the show, and he defined it like this: intimacy “is the feeling that I can tell another person my thoughts and my behaviors without fear of judgment. If I can tell them the things I’ve done – even the things I’m not proud of – and they’re still going to answer the phone the next time I call and say, ‘I’m so glad to hear from you. How are you?’ that’s intimacy.”

*I want you to know that no one was better at withholding judgment and loving to the point of intimacy than Jesus. Even when you mess up. Even when you’ve blown it again and again in your life. Even when you feel like you are worse than a failure – Jesus still*

loves. In Luke 7, we read how Jesus was anointed by a sinful woman. Jesus is eating dinner with at the house of a Pharisee, and a woman who had lived a ‘sinful’ life came up to him, and we read she “brought an alabaster flask of ointment,<sup>38</sup> and standing behind him at his feet, weeping, she began to wet his feet with her tears and wiped them with the hair of her head and kissed his feet and anointed them with the ointment.” Luke 7:37-38. Obviously, the woman wanted intimacy with Jesus. Not sexual intimacy, but the kind of intimacy we defined a moment ago, where she could tell Jesus her thoughts and behaviors without fear of judgment. And what does Jesus say? “Get away from me, you whore”? No – that’s what the Pharisee thought Jesus should have said. We’re told the Pharisee thought that if Jesus was really a prophet he would have known who this woman was he would not have let her touch him. She’d probably been used and abused by men all her life. I’m sure she’d been told repeatedly she was garbage.

But Jesus doesn’t judge or reject her. Instead, he accepts her. He knows where she’s been yet he accepts her just as she is; he doesn’t turn her away. He says, “Your faith has saved you; go in peace.”

Another place: Luke 19 – the account of Zacchaeus the tax collector. You know the story: “Zacchaeus was a wee little man, and a wee little man was he.” The only people in first century Palestine who could rival sinful women for the bottom of the social scale were tax collectors, because they collected revenue for the Roman occupiers and enriched themselves in the process.

We read that Zacchaeus climbed up in a sycamore tree to see Jesus as he passed through Jericho. But before Zacchaeus can say a word, Jesus sees him and says, “Zacchaeus, hurry and come down, for I must stay at your house today.” Luke 19:5. Jesus doesn’t meet Zacchaeus and condemn him. Jesus doesn’t say, “Zacchaeus, you dirty, filthy traitor. How dare you steal from your brothers?” Jesus doesn’t try to get Zacchaeus to prove himself worthy of Jesus’ friendship. Jesus accepts him just as he is, and he wants to stay with Zacchaeus. That doesn’t mean Jesus was just going to have a cup of coffee with Zacchaeus, but for at least a few nights he lived with Zacchaeus in his house. You’ve heard of people inviting Jesus into their lives? Here we see Jesus inviting himself into Zacchaeus’ life! That’s intimacy.

Every time Jesus gets around a social outcast, a racial outcast, a moral outcast, Jesus accepts them – no judgment, only acceptance.

In fact, the only group of people that ever get Jesus angry, the only people that Jesus denounces and condemns, are the Bible teachers and religious leaders. Jesus reserves his harshest criticisms for the good, clean, moral church-going people of his day.

Why do you think that is? *It’s because in the name of God the Pharisees and religious leaders had twisted the definition of love.* They had perverted it. To them, love did not mean acceptance without reservation, love did not mean intimacy without judgment. Instead, for them love meant “clean yourself up, make the changes we think you need to make in your life, apply for membership, and then maybe we’ll let you in.” Love meant

“join our team, prove yourself, and then we’ll accept you.” And sometimes, if you were a “sinful” woman or a tax collector or a Gentile or a Samaritan or some other outcast, then no matter what you did they weren’t going to accept you. They wouldn’t love you. And nothing got Jesus angry like that, because they were misrepresenting the character of God to the people. “But woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you shut the kingdom of heaven in people’s faces.” Matthew 23:13.

Jesus hates self-righteous moralism; he hates religion in his name that has no love. And Christians, I just want you to know that it’s so easy for us to fall into that same mistake. To take one example: we see the culture around us changing at breakneck speed, the sexual revolution absolutely taking over Western civilization, and it understandably unnerves us. We read the newspaper of our local high school, and the front page story last month is about a student transitioning from one gender to another, and we know there’s an agenda behind that story and its prominence so we just want to throw up our hands and go straight into judgmental and condemning mode.

But Jesus tells us, “You know what you need to do with all those people out there who disagree with you? All those who want nothing to do with the church? All those outsiders? You are to love them, accept them for who they are right where they are. You are not to judge or condemn them.” Jesus didn’t even come to judge. “For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.” John 3:17.

This is how I am, and maybe if you’re a Christian you can relate to this: I so badly want to stand for the truth. I don’t want to compromise on the truth. I don’t want to be a mealy-mouthed Christian who won’t take a stand on the tough issues. I’ve dedicated my working life to trying to effectively communicate Biblical truth, and I do not want to bow to cultural pressures and yield one inch when it comes to truth. I’ve been afraid that accepting people, allowing intimacy with people who differed with me on the truth, would be a betrayal of Jesus.

But Jesus says that’s not true, and that truth-telling, while necessary, isn’t sufficient. Jesus doesn’t say, “This is my commandment, that you tell the truth.” He says, “This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you.” John 15:12. Granted, he’s talking there about disciples loving other disciples – Christians loving other Christians. But everything in the New Testament points to Christians taking this kind of accepting, intimate love outside the church and to the world around them.

Another example: we look at the people in our lives, our children, our spouses, our friends and co-workers (not just “sinners” out in the world but those closest to us), and instead of accepting them as they we have a *change agenda* for them. We look at them and say, “I know what’s wrong with you. You need to change, and I know how you need to change.” And boy when we do that they can feel it.

What do they do in response? They go into stealth mode. They feel like they have to lie around us, lie about who they really are and what they are doing. They feel they have to

pretend they are someone they're not in order to win our approval. We do this in our families and with our friends all the time, and it is so destructive to the soul. Friends, God can't really deal with you until you see for yourself who you really are, but some of us have gotten so used to pretending that we don't even know who we are anymore.

But love means acceptance. "These things I command you, so that you will love one another." John 15:17. How many of you remember the Hoka Cinema? It was a movie house off the Square, right behind where Newk's is now over on University Drive. It opened in the late 70s, they had a café at one point, and it was definitely a place where irreligious people hung out. I doubt much of a religious nature went on there, and in fact I'm pretty sure the people the hung out there prided themselves on being the outcasts of Oxford.

But apparently a real sense of community and fellowship and acceptance grew up around the Hoka. People loved to hang out there. People felt like they could be themselves there. Several years ago some folks produced a documentary on the Hoka and they interviewed Sparky Reardon, who was the Dean of Students for a long time at Ole Miss. And at the end of the documentary he said, "I never remember feeling bad when I was at the Hoka. And if I felt bad, I went to the Hoka, and I felt better."

When I heard first heard that years ago I wanted to cry, not because it was so beautiful but because I thought, "You know, I'm not sure anyone has ever said something like that about any church I've ever been a part of as a pastor or a member." But they should, they should say it about all Christian communities, because love means acceptance.

Second, love is received through obedience. Now I want to talk to those this morning who may not be Christians – if that's you, we are so thankful you've chosen to be with us today on Easter Sunday at the high point of the Christian year.

And maybe the first part of this sermon was refreshing for you – maybe you liked hearing a theologically conservative Christian minister talk about accepting all kinds of people. I hope you did. But if I left it at that then my sermon would be misleading. Because while Jesus accepted people for who they were without condition and without reservation, *that didn't mean he approved of everything they did.* Far from it. Yes, he accepted the sinful woman who wiped his feet with her hair, but then "he said to her, 'Your sins are forgiven.'" In other words, you have done wrong, but now it's ok. Luke 7:48. Yes, he accepted Zacchaeus, but then we read this: "And Zacchaeus stood and said to the Lord, 'Behold, Lord, the half of my goods I give to the poor. And if I have defrauded anyone of anything, I restore it fourfold.'" Luke 19:8. Jesus doesn't try to stop him; he saying, "Yes, Zacchaeus, what you were doing was wrong." To the woman caught in adultery in John 8, after Jesus shamed the Pharisees who wanted to stone her to death into walking away, he said to her, "[G]o, and from now on sin no more." John 8:11.

Acceptance of someone does not mean approval of everything they do. Acceptance means you might disapprove of something that someone does but you will never, ever cut

that person off from your fellowship and friendship. Until the day you die you will be there for them, ready to listen, ready to serve, ready to hug, ready to care.

But you don't have to approve of everything. And that just makes sense, because there are certain things that are bad for us, and it would be unloving of us to approve of them in our own lives or in the lives of others.

Several years ago a story came out about a very prominent American pastor. He was gifted on so many levels. This particular pastor was a Harvard graduate, which alone makes him stand out from a whole lot of pastors in the country – like this one. He pastored a large and influential church in the big urban area.

But he had been for many years addicted to prescription pain medication. And of course he hid it – he lied to his wife, he lied to his church, he lied to everyone because the addiction had complete control over him. That's what addictions do. Several years into it, he went to a four-day conference that just happened to be at a drug and alcohol rehabilitation center. But because he just happened to be at this recovery center he was, of necessity, around experienced drug treatment counselors. One of these counselors started watching him over those four days. And at one point during the conference this counselor (who was not a Christian) came up to him and said, "You're a minister, right?" He said, "Yes." And the counselor asked, "Who is your God?" He replied, "I'm a Christian, my God is the triune God of the Bible."

But the counselor said, "Oh, no, that's not your god. Your god is drugs." He had seen something. And the pastor said that it was like he heard that it felt like a knife went into his heart.

Now, was that counselor trying to be mean to the pastor by withholding his approval of his actions? And to that we'd say, "Of course not." And whenever Jesus in his Word, in the Bible, withholds his approval from some thought or behavior of ours, it's not that he doesn't accept us, but it's because he built us for something we can't get it apart from living the way he taught.

Somehow, and obviously we don't know all the details, God created you through Jesus Christ. John 1 tells us that, Colossians 1 tells us that, Hebrews 1 tells us that. And your Creator, your Designer, built you for joy. "These things I have spoken to you, that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be full." John 15:11.

He built you for joy, but you're never going to receive that joy if you refuse to live according to your design. You weren't built for greed (like Zacchaeus), or living for the approval of men (like the sinful woman), or for selfishness, for lust, for worry, for bitterness, to escape from responsibility, or for being perfect. In fact, that was why that pastor used the pills – they enabled him to work harder so he could be the perfect pastor be there for everyone. You weren't even built to live for your career or your family.

You know what you were built for? To abide in the love of God. To rest in his acceptance and approval ultimately. That means, practically, that you were built for prayer to and for worship and adoration of the God of the Bible. It means that you were built in such a way so that his Word in the Scriptures is like food and drink for your soul.

It means that you were built for companionship, and encouragement, and laughter. You were built to enjoy sex inside of a lifelong, covenant marriage between a man and a woman, but not to live for it. You were built to enjoy the work that your hands find to do, but not to live for it. You were built to enjoy the food you eat and the recreation in your life, but not be a slave to it.

And if you're here today and if you wonder why Christians always seem to harp on the changes you need to make, it's because we know this. We know you were built for certain things. We just forget that it ***is emphatically not our job to change people.*** When we forget that, we use the limited tools available to us to try and get you to change – lectures, shame, anger, guilt, withdrawing friendship. We forget that only the Holy Spirit can really change people *and we are not Him.* That's why we come off as obnoxious, impatient, unloving.

Christians, we love people, we accept people, we are intimate with people, we point them to God, and ***he changes them.*** We must remember that. And when we do, it's wonderful. It's so liberating to be able to accept the people around you and say, "Hey, I don't approve of what you do, I think you're making a mistake here, but I'm not going to stop caring about you. I'm not going to lecture you or shame you or cut you off. And when the timing is right God will bring the change. In the meantime, I'm not going anywhere – I love you." It's so much easier to do that than to try and change people.

Friends, if you're here today and you're not a Christian, I want you to know beyond a shadow of a doubt that to follow Jesus Christ means unconditional surrender and absolute obedience to him. There is no room for deviation from his commands. However, on the other side of obedience is joy. Jesus says, "This is what you were built for – do them because it's the only way you can find joy." You were built to obey the commands of Jesus.

That's why Jesus is so insistent on obedience. "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." John 15:10. It's the only way to know his love.

But you may wonder, "How can I trust him? That's a tall order, trusting Jesus enough to give him control of my life because the Bible says so. How can I?" John 15:13: "Greater love has no one than this, that someone lay down his life for his friends." You know what that verse means? It means that in Jesus Christ God wrote himself into your story.

Do you know who Dorothy Sayers is? I first heard of her from the book *The Lost Tools of Learning*, a great book on education. But as it happens she was one of the first women to ever graduate from Oxford University in England back in the early part of the

twentieth century and she was a detective novelist. I heard Tim Keller tell this story once. One of her series of novels was the Peter Wimsey detective novels. The character Peter Wimsey was an aristocrat, he was very smart. He solved all these mysteries. But he was a lonely man.

About halfway through the series, a female character appears in the books, and that female character is named Harriet Vane. Harriet Vane was also one of the first women who ever graduated from Oxford. Harriet Vane is also a writer of detective novels.

What happened? As she was looking into this world she had created, Dorothy Sayers fell in love with Peter Wimsey. She saw how lonely he was, and she wrote herself into that world. She incarnated herself in that world, and in the books as Harriet Vane she married him. She saved him. Isn't that great? Guess what? The Bible goes one better. The gospel goes one better.

Other religions believe God is up there and he's very good and he's very all-powerful, and that's all true. Only Christianity says God looked down into the world he had written, that he had created, and he saw us crashing and burning but he loved us and he wrote himself into our story in the person of Jesus Christ, and he came and he lived the life we should've lived, died the death we should've died, and was raised from the dead on that first Easter Sunday.

You want to talk about love and acceptance? The Bible says that while we were yet sinners, while we were God's enemies, God became a man, he took on flesh, so that he could love us face to face. He didn't demand that we change first; he just loved. Now that's acceptance.

But you want to talk about not approving of whatever we do? So seriously does God disapprove of so many of our thoughts and behaviors, of our sins, that Jesus Christ had to die in our place. Perfect acceptance and perfect obedience in one man, Jesus Christ. And on that first Easter Sunday God raised him from the dead as if to confirm, "Anyone who comes to me through Jesus I will accept and never turn away."

You know, when Jesus was raised from the dead, his body still bore the scars of his crucifixion on it. I never will forget the first time I heard someone explain, "No one in heaven will have scars on their body except Jesus. Jesus wanted to keep his scars because they remind him of us." It is costly to love, it is hard to love. Loving to the point of acceptance means scars. But we are never more like Jesus than when we love like that. "Love so amazing, so divine, demands my soul, my life, my all." PRAY