

“The Still More Excellent Way”
Micah 6:8; 1 Corinthians 12:31-13:13;
Matthew 25:31-46; John 13:12-17, 31-35

November 18, 2018
Pastor Norman Fowler
First Presbyterian Church of Moscow

This fall, we have been talking about what I would call the life of faith, or the journey of faith. We are using some of the descriptions that we as a church saw as central to our life as a church. We went through a discernment process and came up with these ideas: faith and trust in the Lord, togetherness in the body of Christ, spiritual growth, and finally, embracing God’s love for all of us. We’ve talked about how we have a God who embraces us, and we can trust in that God. As we do so, God invites us to live together in a community of faith, and living out that faith is enabled and empowered by the work of the Spirit. The last discernment idea helps us recognize faith is not all inward-looking; we embrace the love of God.

We talked last week about what God’s love is about. It’s central to what he’s inviting us to be and do. We talked about the various words for love. The love that’s in the Gospel is *agape*, and it’s a love that has a movement in it. It recognizes the value of the other. It chooses to care for the other, and it is the action of doing so.

In today’s world, sometimes we can begin to wonder where we might see that love at work. So much of what we hear is the opposite. And yet, it feels like sometimes in the midst of crisis we see examples of times where people show great love. Some of you have probably seen this story about the Paradise, California Advent School girls’ volleyball team and how they were supposed to be in a semi-final tournament. They had lost everything in the wildfire, but they wanted to go anyway. When they showed up, the Lake Forest Christian School in Auburn, California (their opponent) had uniforms made up for them. They had knee pads. They had shoes. They had everything they needed to play the game. But they didn’t stop there. They had a dinner made for them. They had supplies laid out so they had an opportunity to pick up things they needed. They gave each one a \$300 gift card, and they arranged that all the admission to the game would go to them as well. It turned out to be \$16,000.00.

In the midst of a crisis, we see this incredible act of love, a caring for others, a caring for your opponent. It’s one of those moments where you can hear a story and see love at work.

I think we recognize when love is happening. The scripture today is really about that, too. It’s about what we do to show love or to receive love. It’s about the action that love is. When I think of love, I usually think of it as an action that I do, but it’s interesting how much of what we read in 1st Corinthians 13 is a restraint as well. If we look at what it says, it includes: love never gives up (it moves forward), love cares for others more than self, and then there are all these things that love doesn’t do. Love doesn’t want what it doesn’t have. Love doesn’t get a swelled head. Love doesn’t force itself on others. It’s not always “me first.” There are all these ways love is a restraint.

It feels to me like there are two aspects to human nature. We can be incredibly loving, but we can also be incredibly hard on one another. Scripture invites us to recognize that and to restrain ourselves from hardening ourselves. It invites us instead into developing that love and being loving.

Isn't that what Jesus is talking about in Chapter 25 of Matthew? It's the way his disciples live. We sang a song about "Savior, like a shepherd lead us" this morning. Where is he leading us in life? He's leading us to be those who care for one another, who recognize when somebody is hungry or thirsty, or needs to be clothed or given a place to stay, or is sick or in prison and needs to be visited. The interesting thing about this is that as Jesus invites us, it's these concrete activities that begin to show the very fullness of love in our lives.

Here's another story from the fires in California. There was a young man hitchhiking along the road. He is picked up by an older man. They find they have both evacuated from Paradise, the fire-ravaged town in California. The older man, in conversation with this younger man, finds out that in the fire, the young man lost his phone, and it sounded like he lost his job because the place he worked burned down. He was hitchhiking to a job interview. So the older man takes him and gets him a phone, takes him to the interview, waits until he's done, then takes him to lunch.

Sometimes I wonder if these stories only come out of crises. Do we need a crisis to really show our best side? But I also wonder how much anonymous love goes on in times when there's no crisis and nobody is watching closely. I know of lots of incidences where people help other people in ways that show the love God has shown them, but it doesn't get talked about. It doesn't get described on Facebook.

In the midst of a world that can seem so divisive, I think there are an incredible number of people who want to be good and caring and loving—the very thing God invites us to be and to do. It is what Jesus did with his disciples when he washed their feet. He demonstrated an action, and he wants us to be like him, to serve, to do the very thing that he has invited us to do.

When I think about the word "love," sometimes I think about it as a feeling, but it seems like this love that he is talking about is not just a feeling. It is a verb. It's an action. It's what we do. It's how we are involved in our lives, the way we can show the trust we have in God, the faith we hold. Jesus washing his disciples' feet is a concrete action that shows us the very words he then says later: Love one another as I have loved you.

As we go into this week of Thanksgiving, I am thankful for the concrete ways people have shown me that grace, that love of God, the love that we can show one another. I am thankful that we have a Lord that invites us to love one another.

So often we talk about righteousness as right relationship. It feels to me like love is the action that enables right relationship. The very life God invites us to begin, and perhaps ends, with showing one another, and showing our God, the love that we have been shown.

It does feel to me like human nature has the capacity for good or for evil, and we are invited to make love central—to feed it, to make it our habit, to make it our way. Indeed, when we listen to Paul, he talks about all these different ways that we can live our lives, all these different gifts, and then he comes to the end of Chapter 12 and in the Revised Standard Version, it says, "I will show you a still more excellent way." We are invited to that still more excellent way. Amen.