

May 10, 2015



Revival: Living the Methodist Way
“WATCH OVER ONE ANOTHER WITH LOVE”

Rev. Gary Haller
First United Methodist Church
Birmingham, Michigan
Scripture: 1 John 4:7-17

Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God; everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love. God’s love was revealed among us in this way: God sent his only Son into the world so that we might live through him. In this is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins. Beloved, since God loved us so much, we also ought to love one another. No one has ever seen God; if we love one another, God lives in us, and his love is perfected in us.

By this we know that we abide in him and he in us, because he has given us of his Spirit. And we have seen and do testify that the Father has sent his Son as the Savior of the world. God abides in those who confess that Jesus is the Son of God, and they abide in God. So we have known and believe the love that God has for us. God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them. Love has been perfected among us in this: that we may have boldness on the day of judgment, because as he is, so are we in this world.

I visited Duke Divinity School last week as part of the required training for the supervisor of their Seminary Interns. We have a fine young man who will arrive next Saturday and be with us for eleven weeks this summer. Next Sunday I’ll have the privilege of introducing Robert Bledsoe to you in our worship services. But as I was at Duke Divinity, and knowing that Mother’s Day was coming up, I asked some of their students how they would treat Mother’s Day in the pulpit. And those astute students reminded me that Mother’s Day (the 6th Sunday of Easter, lectionary cycle B) is not part of the Christian year, not a religious event at all but really a product of commercial interests – the greeting card people, florists, and restaurant owners – an example of how the culture invades and sets the agenda for the church. So the faithful thing to do, they told me, is simply ignore it. My response, as a wizened preacher of over 37 years, was to tell them this was foolish.

In contrast, the wise preacher remembers what Robert Fulghum said. Fulghum, who wrote *All I Really Need to Know I Learned in Kindergarten*, was a minister before he became a best-selling author. He remembers:

For twenty-five years of my life, the second Sunday of May was trouble. I was obliged in some way to address the subject of Mother's Day. It could not be avoided. The congregation was quite open-minded and gave me free reign in the pulpit. But when it came to the second Sunday in May, the expectation was summarized in the words of one of the more outspoken women in the church: "I'm bringing my mother to church on Mother's Day, Reverend, and you can talk about anything you want. But it had better include *mother*, and it had better be *good!*"¹

I was amused at something Fulghum said in one of his best-selling books. He said that one of the very few reasons he had any respect for his mother when he was thirteen was because "She would reach in to the sink with her bare hands – bare hands! – and pick up that lethal gunk and drop it into the garbage."

"To top that," Fulghum continued, "I saw her reach into the wet garbage bag and fish around in there looking for a lost teaspoon barehanded – a kind of mad courage. She found the spoon in a clump of coffee grounds mixed with scrambled egg remains and the end of the vegetable soup." Fulghum said, "I almost passed out when she handed it to me to rinse off."

"A kind of a mad courage" – that's how Fulghum described the heroism of his mother. So today is a day on which to be thankful for this "kind of mad courage" which many of our mothers have had. There's an old saying that goes, "God could not be everywhere, so God created mothers." And while acknowledging that our moms are not perfect like God, and some fall far short, the germ of truth here is that in an important way a mother's love is a reflection of the divine love. That, however imperfectly embodied, a mother's sacrificial love – any self-giving, sacrificial love – is a reflection of God's love.

What is the church? We have our beliefs. Whether we call ourselves United Methodist or Presbyterian, Roman Catholic or Lutheran, we tend to hold certain core beliefs in common. Laurie spoke about this last week when she summarized Wesley's teachings as, "In essentials (that is, core Christian beliefs) we have unity. In non-essentials (or opinions) we have liberty. In all things we have charity or love." That is, even when we disagree, we do so with kindness and charity. Like other Christians, we believe in the Trinitarian God, Father/Son/Holy Spirit; salvation, not by works, but by grace through faith in Jesus Christ; that Christ is the unsurpassable revelation of God; and that the Holy Spirit is God with us tangibly here and now. We hold these core beliefs in common, and then we have myriad 'opinions' on matters non-essential to Christian identify.

But God does not call us just to gather in various settings and contemplate the beauty of these beliefs, important as they are. God calls us to love. Jesus, in particular, was very clear on this. Repeatedly. "A new commandment I give you, that you love one another even as I have loved you." You could say we began with the "Big Ten" in terms of commandments, but Jesus gave us the commandment that trumps all the others: love. Beliefs provide continuity and boundaries, but only love creates community.

The third epistle of John makes this very black-and-white so that we don't skip over this commandment. "Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God; everyone who

loves is born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love.”

And John Wesley, hardly a dullard, made this central to his understanding of the Christian way. He wrote: “If you unite together, to encourage and help each other in thus working out your salvation, and for that end watch over one another in love, you are they whom I mean by Methodists.” “Love one another as I have loved you.” “Whoever loves is born of God and knows God, for God is love.” “Watch over one another in love.”

And if there was one characteristic by which the early church was known, it was love: long-suffering, sacrificial love. Tertullian, writing around the year 200 A.D., cites even the worst pagans as saying, “Look at how these Christians love one another (while we hate each other); and how they are ready to die for each other.” The early church leaders understood what Jesus commanded. “Beloved,” John’s first letter advises, “let us love one another. For if we love one another, God lives in us, and his love is perfected in us.” It’s more than an important Christian theme. If we are to be the church, this commandment to love is an essential one.

The challenge, of course, is for us to comprehend the expanse of God’s love. This love is so far beyond our understanding. My impression is that many of us have not wrestled with what it means to take the limits off of love after the example of our Lord. And because we haven’t wrestled with what love requires, our love can become harsh and judgmental, and is constrained and stunted by what we think is “decent” or “good enough.”

Jesus went to the cross in the name of love, giving his very life for you and me. He gave himself, stretching the salvation he offers over everyone. “For all, for all, our savior died! For all, for all, was crucified!” declared Wesley to those who tried to limit God’s love in his time. This was a hallmark of Wesley’s teaching: that grace is offered to all people. Grace is in all, and for all. And when we let God’s love work, *in* us and *through* us, amazing things can happen.

I’m glad to say that God’s love is active and alive in this community of faith. In this fellowship of Christ, I see you “watching over one another in love.” I see people preparing meals for families who have illness. I see you visiting and caring for one another in hospital and rehab settings. I see you gathering around and supporting those who are bereaved, supporting one another through phone calls and cards. I see you challenging and caring for those who stray from Christ’s way. I watch you welcoming an increasingly diverse people to this church. I see you persisting in your love even when others disappoint or hurt you. I see you speaking kindly and charitably when you disagree. I see you distributing meals to the needy, providing shelter for the homeless, teaching math, reading and art skills to the disadvantaged, and in all of these things you are the very body of Christ. Love creates community.

But we do not love as perfectly as Christ. And just because Christ was an extraordinary embodiment of God does not excuse us. He commanded us to love as he loved. He told us that we are to be perfect as our heavenly father was perfect. He didn’t minimize what we can be. Watch over one another in love. Not just sometimes, or in some places, or when it’s easy and convenient or isn’t going to cost us anything. If God’s love has no limits, at the very least we ought to stretch the constraints we place upon love. Ask yourself: If I am to love others as completely as Jesus loved me, and he gave his life upon the cross, how am I called to love?

Years ago, an interesting thing happened in the church of Samuel Colgate. This is the Colgate of the Colgate-Palmolive conglomerate. During a revival, a prostitute, well-known in their community, came forward and confessed her sins. She was sincere, breaking down and weeping openly. She asked God to save her soul and expressed a desire to join the church. "I'll gladly sit in some back corner," she said.

Their tradition was to immediately accept a penitent person into the church. But the preacher hesitated to call for a motion to accept her into membership, and for a few minutes the silence was oppressive. Finally, a member stood up and suggested that action on her request be postponed.

Immediately, Mr. Colgate rose and said, "I guess we blundered when we prayed that the Lord would save sinners. We forgot to specify what kind of sinners. We'd better ask Him to forgive us for this oversight. The Spirit has touched this woman and made her truly repentant, but apparently the Lord doesn't understand she isn't the type we want Him to rescue." Another motion was made, and the woman was immediately voted into membership.

Let's not forget that righteous people were always upset because Jesus didn't see people through rigid preconceptions. How did he react to others? Did he say, "Oh, he's a Samaritan – we know what a sinner he is!" Or, "There's a Roman. Foreign dog – just watch how skillfully I avoid him!" Or "There's a leper. Those people are full of sin – be careful or we'll catch it, too!" No, Jesus never treated people by what category people put them in. He opened his arms to everyone. As John Wesley taught, "God's grace is *in* all and *for* all." No matter how sinful or unworthy we consider people, Jesus welcomes all. As our choir sang in Charles Wesley's anthem: "Amazing love! How can it be, That Thou, my God, shouldst die for me? Amazing love! How can it be, That Thou, my God, shouldst die for me?"

I'll tell you this – and in your heart you know this – whatever limits you and I place upon the movement of love will be challenged, shaken, destroyed. Love will churn us until all barriers are broken down.

Mary Lou Carny has been well-known for years across our country as a writer of devotional books. She'd been invited to a special conference on the weekend of Mother's Day. The conference planners decided this would be a great time to have younger mothers, middle-aged and older mothers all together with Mary Lou Carny as the principle speaker. And they planned it so that all of those at the conference could hurry home Saturday night and be with their families on Mother's Day. Mary Lou couldn't get a plane out that night so she was out at the airport first thing the next morning to catch her plane to those she loved, but there was a dense fog and her plane couldn't take off.

"So," she said, "there I was stuck in an airport – with all of those I loved best miles away. I'd planned to be there, I wanted to be there. I knew there would have been a corsage for me. I knew there would have been presents for me. I knew that after church there would have been lunch for me. And here I was stuck in an airport and it was the typical kind of folks sitting around me."

"We were sort of in a little circle, the way they had the chairs arranged in this airport. And right across from me was a young mother, traveling alone but with a screaming baby. And this baby

had screamed ever since I had sat down and it was still screaming. This young mother was trying but she was having no success. Another young mother had a two year old and he was running up and down, rolling under the seats, stepping on people's feet, slapping the back of their Sunday morning newspapers as they read. She would speak to him occasionally but he was just running rampant over everything. Other folks were mumbling, complaining, 'Here it's Mother's Day, I was supposed to be in Dallas by now.' 'Well, I'd planned to be in St. Louis.' 'I wish I were home.'"

And Carny said, "Out of all of this I suddenly noticed to my left and across from me an elderly lady who was wearing tennis shoes, and one of them was untied. What got my attention was that she was looking at her own foot as if she knew there was a problem and she didn't know what to do about it. She looked confused, sort of lost, that 'My shoe is untied and I don't know what I can do about that' look. She looked worried, when suddenly a young man, well-dressed, about three seats down from me saw the same thing, and he got up and walked across and got down on one knee and tied this woman's shoe. Everyone say it. And her eyes welled-up and she patted him on the shoulder and he went back and sat down.

"But suddenly our little group of strangers here was transformed. Somebody asked that young mother if they could have a try with her screaming baby and she was sort of ready for anybody to have a try. Somebody else decided maybe they could entertain this two-year-old who was running roughshod all over everybody and got down on the floor trying to talk with him, trying to tell him a little story. I saw somebody take out their wallet and take some pictures and say 'Well, this is what my mother looks like' and somebody else say 'This is what my kids look like' and our little area was just transformed from chaos into community, transformed by one young man who dared to treat a stranger as he would want somebody else to treat his own mother. The barriers were shattered. As different as they all were, black, white and Asian, very young and very old, they put aside all partiality and became a community of gentleness, mercy and love."

It's always within our reach. What Jesus wants his followers to be and do, that is. It's always just a loving heartbeat away. The love which was in the heart of Jesus continues to grow in the power of the Resurrection. It lives in those who watch over one another with love, loving as Christ first loved us, seeking to do good to all people, and forgiving those who cause injury. "Beloved, let us love one another. For love is from God; everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love." May we pray?

Gracious and compassionate Lord, you would still gather us to you like a mother hen gathers together her chicks – and often we still will not let you. Gather us together within the embrace of your love and help us to offer your love to everyone. Challenge us, correct us, guide us, and like a shepherd, gather us to that spiritual place you know will give us growth and strength. May we watch over one another in love, Lord, as you watch over us. Amen.

1. Fulghum, *It Was on Fire When I Lay Down on It*, p. 100.