

## **“Love Always”**

Text: John 14:15-21

I was speaking with Jay Welton this week over iced tea...and at one point I prefaced a comment I was about to make by saying, “I don’t want to sound like a preacher or a pastor Jay...” And Jay, quickly and kindly interrupted me saying, “It’s okay Brian...you are one...say what you need to say.” ☺

Being a preacher or a pastor isn’t as easy as it may appear. My younger sister and brothers are fond of giving me a hard time. They’ll often ask, “So how was your week’s worth of work on Sunday morning Brian?” As if all a pastor does is preach for a few minutes on Sundays.

Preaching isn’t as easy as it appears however.

A pastor was once asked by a young child what was the highest number they’d ever counted to. The pastor didn’t know how to reply and so asked this child what was the highest number he had counted to. The child responded, “5,372.” “Oh,” said the pastor. “Why did you stop there?” “[The sermon] was over.” The child answered.

I don't know how true this really is Anne but somewhere along the way I once read that "the longest sermon on record was preached by [a] Clinton Lacy of West Richland, Washington in February of 1955. [You'll appreciate this...] [Apparently] it took 48 hours and 18 minutes to deliver it.

[Not long after that sermon] Small wonder someone proposed the adoption of a new Beatitude: "Blessed is the preacher whose train of thought has a caboose."

There's a lot more that a pastor does than just preach on Sundays. But still...I think Anne and Mary and Joe and others of you who have preached would agree...preaching ain't the easiest thing in the world.

Peoples' responses after a sermon are often telling...

One person said to the preacher, "You always manage to find something to fill up the time."

Another has said, "I don't care what *they* say, I like your sermons."

Or this... "If I'd known you were going to be good today I'd have brought a neighbor."

And I like this one... "Did you know there are 243 panes of glass in the windows?"

A preacher knows she or he is in trouble when they hear, “We shouldn't make you preach so often.”

To proclaim the Gospel...to proclaim the Good News of Jesus...to preach about the love of God for all people...ain't easy...and oddly and ironically it *can* get preachers in trouble.

If there's any consolation for a preacher...it's probably good to remember that even Jesus got in trouble...he often said things and did things that people didn't want to hear or that they just didn't like.

And our text today from John captures a part of this reality. Jesus' words gave then and still give now the challenge: “If you love me, you will keep my commandments.” And Jesus' commandments were these: “Love God and love your neighbor.”

And here in John...the gospel is telling us that when Jesus could no longer be physically present...another Advocate...the Spirit of God...would be with his followers—with us—forever.

Our challenge as preachers and as people is to know how to follow the Spirit of God. And this *is* a challenge. And from my perspective, this is what makes the work of a preacher or pastor the most difficult.

Following the Spirit of God...

For the Spirit of the Lord prompted Jesus “to bring good news to the poor...to proclaim release to the captives...recovery of sight to the blind...[and] to let the oppressed go free...” This is what the Bible says.

The Spirit of the Lord often led Jesus to reach out to the marginalized of his society. I believe that the Spirit of God calls us to do no less today.

And the caboose of Jesus’ preaching...of Jesus’ ministry can be summed up this way: “Love Always.” And more specifically, “Love People Always.”

I know that the sermon Phil Gulley preached last Sunday challenged many of us on different levels. If you didn’t hear or haven’t heard his sermon yet...I encourage you to watch it on Calvary’s website.

I know that my words following his sermon at the 10:55 service have been challenging too. In my pastoral letter to our congregation this past week I’ve communicated that it is time for Calvary to communicate very clearly the welcoming and affirming ministry we’ve sought to embody...a ministry that acknowledges God’s love for all people...for people of all sexualities and genders...for people in all realities and circumstances of life.

Many of you I know have been encouraged and inspired by this challenge. And some of you I know are struggling with this challenge.

Some of you have asked me, “What does this mean?” “Are we going to be a one-issue congregation?” “Is this going to change Calvary?”

**What does this mean?** It means that will articulately communicate the ministry we’ve already embodied...a ministry that reaches out to all of God’s children...a ministry that seeks to be a Christ-like community which experiences and shares God’s love.

**Are we going to be a one-issue congregation?** Heavens no. We haven’t been nor will we be. Except...to make sure that we focus on doing ministry and mission together in the name of Christ.

**Is this going to change Calvary?** Yes and no. Yes in the sense that we can be sure that whoever we invite to worship with us...to do ministry with us...to participate in our fellowship...will be welcomed and affirmed for who they are and that all of us can actively and fully participate in living what it means to be a Christ-like community. And no in the sense that we’re not going to all leave one Sunday and come back the next with all kinds of banners and rainbows flying around.

Whenever we begin to think about the marginalized in our society...and there are many who are marginalized...single and divorced dads and moms...single and divorced women and men...the physically and mentally challenged and handicapped ...people who have gone to countries as refugees from other countries around

the world...people who are living in this country and in others who are undocumented often because of circumstances and realities that are far beyond their control...young people and older folk within the LGBTQ community...abused women and children and men...and we can go on...for there are many who are pushed to the margins...

It is difficult for those of us who don't live in the margins to understand what life is like. And when we begin to talk about those who do live in the margins...it may feel like that's all we do. We may wonder, "What about me?" "Don't I count?"

The love of God reminds us that all of us count. And if we struggle to grasp this...at least for me it's helpful to remember what the scripture says about Jesus...

*Who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death—even death on a cross.*

You see, the story of Jesus is the story of one who left the center of the universe and lived and loved and served in the margins of life.

Will you join me in seeking to love God and to love others? Will you join me in seeking to follow the Spirit of God—even if it seems challenging and even if it takes us to life's margins?

Will you join me in praying that individually and collectively we may reflect ever more fully and completely what it is to be a Christ-like community that experiences and shares God's love...always?