

## **“FOR GOD SO LOVED THE WORLD,” A Sermon delivered by the Reverend Dr. Geoffrey G. Drutchas, St. Paul United Church of Christ, Taylor, February 14, 2021**

Today is Valentine’s Day—a day popularly associated with love and romance. What better time to give thought to God’s love for us as a foundation for our own Christian faith! Although now very secular, Valentine’s Day actually started out a Christian feast day honoring an early Christian saint and martyr named Valentius. Legend has it that he embroiled himself in trouble which cost him his life by officiating at wedding services for Roman soldiers who in that time of the ancient Roman Empire were not allowed to marry, Roman Catholic, Episcopal, and Lutheran Churches still pay some homage to St. Valentius.

In our own United Church of Christ, we don’t venerate any saints except the Biblical authors Saints Matthew, Mark, Luke, John, Paul. But anyone like Valentius who promotes the cause of love and marriage is someone that I like and am glad to honor.

Personally, I think there is too little love in the world. There needs to be more. That’s one of the reasons why I am a Christian. Love is very central to Christianity. We hear this declared in our scripture lesson from the Gospel of John for this morning where Jesus declares to his apostles and the rest of us listening: “And now I give you a new commandment: love one another. If you have loved for one another, then everyone will know that you are my disciples.” (*John 13:34-35*) Elsewhere in his ministry Jesus also declares: “You shall love Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the great and first commandment. A second is like it, You shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments depend all the law and the prophets.” (*Matthew 22:37-40*) Jesus preached that we should even love our enemies. (*Matthew 5:44*) What’s more he demonstrated this love on the cross at Calvary when he sacrificed his life for us and even asked God to forgive those who were crucifying him, saying “Father, forgive them for they know not what they do.” (*Luke 23:34*)

Of course, Jesus was simply embodying the love that God has for us. Basically, his whole life mission was to reveal God’s love to us. Jesus was always very explicit in calling our attention to God’s love. My favorite words from Jesus on God’s love are those we recite at the start of every communion time. Like me, you probably know them by heart: “For God so loved the world that his gave his only son, that whosoever believeth in him shall not perish but have everlasting life.” (*John 3:16*) What powerful words! What a beautiful reassurance!

I know that there are a lot of folks today who believe that all religions are alike. They say it doesn’t matter what religion you choose because they all lead us in the same direction. Yet I can’t agree. I have taken a serious look at other faiths. At divinity schools and seminaries, such exploration, which I and others have pursued, is called “studies in comparative religion.” However, I have never found a faith that emphasizes love as Jesus did and Christianity continues to do. Not Hinduism. Not Buddhism. Not

Judaism. Not Islam, which in fact talks more about divine “mercy” more than divine “love” which is not really the same. The faith that Jesus proclaimed really *is* unique.

Jesus was Jewish. His message was very much grounded in Judaism. But he teased out from his Jewish faith some teachings that weren’t so evident. Jesus also added to them with the special insights that he had as God’s own son and as the living embodiment of God’s word. Consequently, he could and did speak about God’s love and our responsibility to love God and one another with a total authority that amazed his audiences and disconcerted the teachers of law who thought they knew everything. Don’t let a rule or law get in the way of loving other people, Jesus said. If law becomes an obstruction to love then someone is misinterpreting the law and thwarting God’s purposes, he made clear in everything he said. To me this is a very sensible idea. Yet it’s also a radical conviction that got Jesus killed by those who felt that we can take love too far, busting through human boundaries and breaking across human lines and divisions that some would prefer to keep in place, perhaps for their own selfish benefit.

This is not to say that our love as Christians should not be balanced. On this topic I subscribe to the wisdom of the Protestant Christian theologian and United Church of Christ pastor Paul Tillich. Many years ago, he wrote a fine, short essay which he entitled *Love, Power, and Justice*. Interpreting the gospel truth preached by Jesus, Tillich argued that Christian love always needs to be tempered by both power and justice. Love that doesn’t have any power in it; love that doesn’t get enacted or put into practice is nothing more than sentimental talk. Put another way, love talk that just stays talk amounts to little more “sweet nothings.”

Likewise, love that is not girded by a sense of justice or fairness can end up as something monstrous. Love not balanced out by a sense of what’s fair, just, and appropriate can make unhealthy, even destructive, demands on others. This is what’s happening when love turns fanatical. It’s also what going on when the person upon whom love is focused begins to feel claustrophobic to the point where they need to escape and get away. Yes, love needs power and justice as its constant companions to remain balanced and healthy for us and to be a happy experience.

Jesus modelled this kind of love of balanced love in all his relationships. He put love into action. Again and again, he demonstrated his love for others in positive, concrete ways in kind, caring words and in moments of healing. But Jesus also played fair in love, never using his love to selfishly manipulate others. Nor did he allow his love for one person to lead him to neglect everyone else. As God’s son, keeping everything balanced, Jesus made love something beautiful.

None of us can hope to be as perfect as Jesus was. But as we go on through life as Christians we can still strive to perfect our love so that it more sincere and less selfish. The Apostle Paul took the example of Jesus very seriously. Jesus’ words too. If I may say so, he started out as a mean old man—arrogant and vindictive.

Although in the family business of tent-making, Paul, then called Saul, made his living as bounty hunter of Christians until he had a mystical encounter with Jesus Christ on the road to Damascus, which is located in present-day Syria. Jesus said to him, “Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?” (*Acts 9:1-9*) That question turned Paul’s life around. Blinded for a time, his eyes were opened spiritually by the risen, exalted Christ to a way of life informed and shaped by love for God and love for one another. Paul became Christianity’s most eloquent spokesman for its message of love. He proclaimed that message again and again across the Mediterranean world, ranging from the Holy Land and the Middle East to Turkey and Rome.

Consider these messages shared in the letters or epistles that he wrote to the budding Christian believers in Rome, Corinth, Ephesus, and Colossae. To the Romans he said: “God’s love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy spirit which has been given us.” (*Romans 5:5*) He added: “Let love be genuine; hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good; love one another with brotherly affection.” (*Romans 8:38-39*) Paul also gave the Romans this assurance: “Neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, not things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.” (*Romans 8:38-39*)

That’s beautiful testimony, isn’t it? But Paul didn’t stop preaching there. To the Ephesians he wrote: “Be imitators of God, as beloved children. And walk in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.” (*Ephesians 5:1-2*) However, Paul’s most superlative proclamation of our call to love one another in the spirit of Jesus Christ comes in his First Letter to the Corinthians. Here Paul says: “If I speak in the tongue of men and of angels but have not love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. And if I have prophetic powers and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to [be able to move] mountains, but have not love, I am nothing. If I give away all I have, and if I deliver my body to be burned [in sacrifice] but have not love, I gain nothing.” (*1 Corinthians 13:1-3*) What Paul underscores is that there is simply no substitute for love.

Spirituality is empty without love. Likewise, in love’s absence wisdom is not so wise. Love, sincere love, is what puts flesh on the bones of our faith and makes it meaningful. A Christian without love in his or her heart for God and others is just being a hypocrite because love is so fundamental to who God calls to be and how to act. As Paul further explains in his letter to the Corinthians, real love is demonstrated when we set aside all arrogance, rudeness, irritability, resentment, and negativity and instead cultivate in ourselves patience, kindness, hope, and a willingness to trust God and others. (*1 Corinthians 13:4-8*)

Yes, Paul is well-acquainted with human foibles. He knows that we aren’t going to hit the mark every time. But he advises us to “make love your aim.” (*1 Corinthians 14:1*) In other words, keep working at it until you get in the habit of loving as you should love—all

in Christ's name and in keeping with his own example. Our capacity to love, Paul believes, is the best evidence of our spiritual maturity where we have given up "childish ways." (*1 Corinthians 13: 11-13*)

Frankly, I grew up in a family household that had a lot of trouble expressing love. Fortunately, we all got better at it as time went on. But that experience has made me more conscious of the importance of both expressing and demonstrating love. And it needs to be at the core of our faith and personal theology.

When I was ordained one of the presiding ministers for the service gave me instructions based on example of the characters of the Charles Schulz comic strip, "Peanuts." That minister noted that in the comic strip both the Lucy and Charlie Brown were able to tell the truth. But Lucy could only tell the truth while Charlie Brown had the gift of telling the truth with love. That extra ingredient, the presiding minister said to me, makes all the difference. "Geoffrey," she said, "in your ministry ahead always strive to tell the truth with love. That will make all the difference." Those are wise words that I cherish still. It's advice I try to follow, always.

I hope, congregation, that you have experienced that wisdom in action with me. And I try to preach and teach it too. Years from now when my day as your pastor is done I hope that you will remember me as a pastor who preached the God's word faithfully and preached it simply enough to be understood in terms of love for God and love for one another. On this Valentine's let us show the world that faith is all about love—love spoken and love demonstrated even in the most awkward and difficult moments of our lives. May God bless us and help us to be a people who know how to love—as Jesus loved. **Amen.**