

6 Epiphany A 2023

Deuteronomy 30:15-20

Psalms 119:1-8

1 Corinthians 3:1-9

Matthew 5:21-37

What does love look like?

It's the time of year
when love looks like hearts and flowers,
when love looks like chocolate,
or a special meal
or something bubbly in a glass.

In this community of faith,
Love also looks like cardboard boxes
overflowing with cards and treats and necessities
for our homeless neighbors.

In the world of advertising,
The world of late stage capitalism,
We're told it's what makes a Subaru a Subaru.
That it's what keeps Southwest Airlines aloft.

Some of this is ridiculous,
Some is real,
Some can be delightful.

But love, actually,
Looks like something else
At its essential core.

Believe it or not,
Love looks like the law.

The law is an expression of love.
Justice is love in action.*

Jesus knew this,
Like Moses before him.
That's what he's talking about
In the Sermon on the Mount.
How to live within the law
So that it shows what love looks like.

The giving of the law
That Moses brought down from the mountain
Is the completion of God's great act of liberation,
When the children of Israel
Passed from slavery into freedom.
The law was the gift
That showed them how to live
In the new world opening up before them.
Without the law,
Freedom would descend into chaos and death.

Choosing life meant choosing to live
Within the gracious boundaries of the law.

The law showed the children of Israel
How to live in community with each other
And in friendship with God.
How to be a people of integrity,
How to be trustworthy,
Faithful, responsible.

Like everything we get our hands on,
We have made the law something less,
Cheaper and more burdensome
Than it was meant to be.
But the true nature of the law
cannot be compromised.
It remains, at its heart,
The precious, life-giving promise of God.
The best way to live.

No one understood that law better than Jesus.
He came, he said,
To bring the law to fulfillment,
To show and embody
What love looks like.

He invited his friends and followers
To look beyond the surface
Of the "shalts and shalt nots"
To what had always been the essence of the law:
The invitation to choose life
By regarding God with reverence and awe,
And our neighbors with respect, compassion, and goodwill.

Jesus' teaching on the law

In the Sermon on the Mount
Has been called the greater righteousness
Of the new and greater teacher
Sitting down in Moses' seat.

But the righteousness that Jesus teaches
Is not different
Than the righteousness of Moses.
The teaching of Jesus simply helps us to unpack
What has been at the heart of the law all along:
The way to live,
To live in harmony with God and neighbor.

It isn't an easy way.
But it is the way of promise,
The way of life.
And we can choose it,
As the children of Israel chose it,
As the friends of Jesus chose it,
As those who have gone before us chose it.
We choose imperfectly,
And with mixed motives,
And we screw up,
And the way of life remains,
Always open to us when we choose it again.

So what does that way of life look like
Here and now?
How are we called to show and share
The precious heart of life?

We have talked, often,
Over the past few years,
As the world has grown ever darker
And the future has seemed more uncertain,
About hope as the great gift
That the faithful can embody
And offer to the world.
And I still believe it is true.
We are called to model and offer hope.

But as I hear the words of Jesus today –
Tough words with which I have wrestled over and over –
There is a gift in these words
That seems new to me.
Reconciliation.

Jesus invites us to be reconciled,
With each other,
And so with God.
First be reconciled with your sibling,
He says,
And then bring your gift to God.

What could be more important
In these times
When we cannot agree about much of anything,
Great or small?
When we believe that our integrity,
Our identity,
Depends on remaining in opposition –
In opposition to those who are different,
Who seem wrong, misguided,
Foolish or deceitful?

When everything is uncertain,
We want something to hold on to,
And holding on to our principles,
Our opinions,
Those things that seem foundational,
Seems essential.
We believe, perhaps,
That choosing sides
Means choosing life.

Even the gracious phrase,
Choose life,
Has been coopted by one side
in one of our most bitter debates,
the fight over unrestricted access
to safe and legal abortion.

But the embrace of life
Belongs to everyone.
God's law cannot be coopted.
We are free, set free
By the hand of a liberating God,
Who calls us to remain free
By submitting to the law.

And so that freedom is costly.
It demands humility,

And relinquishment.
This is difficult,
When we would rather be right,
And win,
And have our adversaries admit that we are right.

But reconciliation
Is the way forward,
The way of life,
The way of Jesus.

And it is the only way to live in community.
Do we want to live in a place of hostility and exploitation,
Of viciousness and slander?
Not many of us are murderers,
But Jesus shows us
That if we want to live in community,
We need to let go of verbal blows against our neighbors as well.**
If not, even if we do not do murder,
We detract from, rather than fostering,
A community of respect and trust.

Jesus treats adultery in the same way,
By condemning objectification and exploitation,
Which have no place in a community of mutual love and respect.
And as for the teaching on divorce,
Remember that he spoke to a time very different from our own,
And was focused principally on the abandonment
Of wives and children, leaving them isolated and in poverty.

Jesus shows his friends and followers –
And us –
Some of the principal ways
We fragment and fracture community.
And in every case,
There is that clear and costly way forward:
Be reconciled.

First, be reconciled.
In place of hostility and hatred,
Be kindly disposed.
Assume good intent.

This may seem impossible,
When we see so much viciousness around us.

But we are called to show and share
The best way to live,
As our siblings in other faiths
Show and share the best way to live.

I believe
We who do the costly work
Of living in Christian community
have something precious to offer.

Those of us who have heard the words of Jesus
And trusted him
Can see, and reach for,
And sometimes embody and show forth,
Those gifts that make a difference.
Hope in the darkness.
Reconciliation in the midst of polarization.

We are called to show what love looks like.
It looks like friendship in place of hostility,
Respect in place of exploitation,
Fidelity, responsibility, humility.

We are called to look like Jesus.

Jesus is what love looks like.

*Attributed to Cornel West, after MLK

** See the online *Salt* commentary for 6 Epiphany 2023