

Sunday, April 28, 2024

Morning Message

Will you pray with me? Speak truth to our hearts, O God. Speak love to our lives, that we may abide in your love and share it joyously with others. Speak grace to our souls, that we may rest in your grace and forgive others as we have been forgiven. Speak mercy to your world, that all may know your love and grace. In Jesus's name, I pray. Amen.

Love God. Love one another. Help send kids to camp. End of sermon. It is that simple. But we know that what is simple is not necessarily easy. Loving God and loving one another is just not that easy. "Beloved, let us love one another," states John. Why? Because love is from God and in showing love to one another, we honor God and reflect the love God has for us. Through love, God lives in us, and by loving others we strengthen our relationship with God. And while simple, this concept is not easy to master. History is littered with examples of how not-easy it is, and tomorrow's history being made today is filled with examples of humans unable to love one another, often because of real or, sadder yet, perceived differences. The human genome project reported that human DNA is greater than ninety-nine percent alike, with only a handful of letters out of three billion in our DNA code changing our physical appearance. We are essentially far more alike than we are different. And yet it would seem that loving God is easy compared to loving other people.

Love God. When I was required in the Ordination process to articulate my theology of God, I began by saying, "God is love. And when we love, we are like God." In these 15 verses from 1 John, the word "love" is used 29 times! With stunning brevity, John tells us what God is and what God is not. John might have said that God is power or order or goodness. In our insecurity and in our longing for protection, we would yearn oh-so-much for a God who would control nature and prevent sickness and violence, a God who would protect us from all harm. In a world that is morally confusing, we wish for a God who would lay down the law with complete clarity, and hold everyone accountable in ways we could clearly see. In our hunger to possess, we might even imagine a God of prosperity, one who promises to make us rich if we but obey a few rules and live by a few God-given principles.

Whatever may be true about God's power or moral order or generosity, John avoids all these descriptions in favor of the simple word agape (Greek) or love. It is not power or law or

prosperity, but self-sacrificing love that is the heart of the truth about God. “We love because God first loved us” (v. 19). When God first loves us, we are so very often unlovely and unloving, unworthy to be loved by a holy love. God loves us before we recognize that we are God’s children. And when we recognize that we are God’s children and thus worthy of God’s love, that love itself transforms us. The love comes first, before any claim on our part that we are worth being loved.

Love one another. Loving God is easy compared to loving other people. Yet loving others is the earthly test of our love for God. It is how we show the world that we love God. It’s that simple. But it’s not that easy. How do we love someone who has hurt us in some way, or someone who continues to hurt us, over and over? How do we love someone who is always asking us for things – things that he or she ought to be able to get for him- or herself – things that we had to work for, so why shouldn’t he or she have to work for them? How do we love someone whose lifestyle we don’t understand or whose lifestyle we even disapprove of? Oh, I could go on... “We love because God first loved us” (v. 19). Our love for others should follow the same pattern as God’s love for us. Like God, we are to love the one who is unlovely and even unresponsive to our love. It is easy for us to love those who love us in return. We are commanded to love the one who is unloving, angry, and hurtful. Only then do we see for ourselves what God-as-love is really like.

Today, we are celebrating Campership Sunday. One way that we as a faith community choose to love one another is by helping kids go to camp. In 2022, a Campership Committee was formed here at Union Church. Their first order of business was to establish an endowed Campership Fund with \$30,000 from a bequest to the church from the estate of Jack and Barb Sheble. That fund grew with the addition of our “Joys and Concerns” love offerings from 2022. In 2023, the Campership Committee established operating guidelines, made a \$1000 donation to Pine Tree Camp to be used in their area of greatest need, and funded camp for seven kids at the Belgrade Center for All Seasons Day Camp and at Camp Mechuwana, the UMC church camp in Winthrop. The Campership Committee is now making plans for 2024, which include sending even more kids to camp, supporting the Pine Tree Camp, and growing the Campership Fund. That’s where you all come in! Donations are welcomed, and can be made by cash or check (made out to the church, with “Campership Fund” in the memo line.

An important and fun element of camp is the campfires. If we take the analogy of campfires (with a nod to our service to God), we recognize that the campfire is a source of light, and it’s a way to

celebrate community as we sit around the campfire in groups. In the darkest of nights, a campfire provides warmth and light. It's a great symbol of our enduring faith and finding hope in challenging times. The idea of a campfire draws us in, creating a warm and inviting space, and promoting community and togetherness. Going to camp is an act of courage and resiliency. It's a wonderful opportunity to try new things, make new friends, and through it all, grow in ways that are unique and impactful. At camp, kids learn to love others and they learn to love themselves in ways they might not learn anywhere else.

As we support the Campership Fund of Union Church, God's love of us inspires our love for others. We do not claim credit for loving others, nor do we love only those who seem lovable, according to our definition of what that looks like, or because of how we have experienced God's love.

**Love God. [Make vertical motion.] Love one another. [Make horizontal motion.] [Repeat...]
Help send kids to camp. End of sermon.**