

Learning to Love Others

A sermon preached by the Revd. Theodore S. Atkinson, pastor, Oxford, Presbyterian Church, Oxford, PA on March 9, 1986: Scripture Lessons: 1 Samuel 18:1-4; 2 Samuel 1:25-26; Romans 12:9-21; John 13:34-35.

What's the mark of a Christian? Throughout the ages Christians have devised all sorts of symbols to identify themselves as followers of Christ. They've worn crucifixes. They've placed the sign of the fish on their doors. They've worn lapel pins. They've put bumper stickers on their cars. They've worn distinctive kinds of clothing like the mennonites.

All those things are fine. There's nothing wrong with them. But Jesus told us the most important mark of a Christian is love. On the eve of the crucifixion he gathered his little band of apostles together in an upper room. Among the many things he shared with them that evening, perhaps ~~the thing he was most insistent about was their need to love one another.~~

"A new commandment I give you: Love one another. I have loved you, so you must love one another. All will know that you are my disciples if you love one another."

Christ wants love to be the mark of a Christian in all our relationships. Today I'd like to talk with you about our need to learn to love our families, our friends, and our fellow Christians.

First, our families. As the old saying goes, "charity begins at home." Love must begin at home. Charlie Brown once said, "I love all humanity. It's just individual people that I can't stand." Sometimes it's easier to have a general kind of love for humankind than it is to have a specific love for our family members.

In one of Charles Dickens novels there's a woman who loved the poor natives in Africa. She collected money for them. She made clothes for them. She attended all the anti-slavery meetings. She made speeches. In

the meanwhile her own children were dressed in rags, living in filth, undernourished, with no mother to look after them. Sometimes Christians can be so caught up in loving people far away that we neglect our duty to love our own families.

Carl Jung, the great psychologist, once met a very holy man. He was so impressed by this man until he saw how this man treated his wife. She was a tissue of neuroses and suffering because of the unkind and unloving way he treated her. It became clear to Jung that this man's priorities were all messed up. His reputation for being a holy and loving person was more important to him than loving his wife.

Sometimes the family is the one place we allow ourselves the luxury of being rude and disrespectful. We say cutting and mean things to our wife ~~or children or parents that we wouldn't dare say to a neighbor.~~ Sometimes the modern fad of being honest and open about our feelings is merely an excuse for venting all the venom and anger and hatred pent up inside us. We excuse our meanness by saying, "I just had to be honest and open."

How can we learn to love our families better? Let me suggest three ways. *First, there's listening.* It's impossible for us to love other people unless we listen to them. The kind of listening I'm talking about is listening which doesn't quickly judge.

I can remember as a high school student going over to my sister, Mary's, house to talk about my doubts about God. She sat and listened for hours without arguing, without criticising, without judging, without preaching to me. From time to time she would ask questions to help her understand me better. So often when I have been listened to by others I realise things about myself I didn't know before. As a friend listens to me talk about a problem or a conflict so often an answer comes to me that helps me work

out my problems. We learn to love our families when we listen to them.

Secondly, we learn to love our families by touching, hugging, kissing. Some people are never touched except in anger. One young man said that the only time he could remember being touched by his father was when he was spanked. There's a home in downtown Buffalo, New York that my former church supported in mission giving called *Simple Gifts*. It's a home for battered wives. There are many women whose experience with touching has been extremely painful.

But some of the warmest memories I have from childhood have to do with touching. I remember as a little boy sitting on my father's lap with his arms around me as he read to me. I remember putting my arms around my mothers legs and hugging them when I was frightened. I remember ~~their kisses and hugs.~~ Touch is a way of saying, "I love you." In times of tragedy and loss, a hug, an embrace can say, "I love you" so much more effectively than words. We can learn to love our families by learning how to touch them, hug them, and kiss them in love.

Thirdly, there's time shared with family members. Love can't be expressed without making time for the person whom we love. A man decided to take the day off from work to go fishing with his boy. At the end of the day both father and son wrote in their separate diaries. The father wrote, "Took the day off. Went fishing with my boy. Felt like I accomplished nothing." The son scribbled in his diary, "This has been the best day ever. I spent the whole day with dad fishing."

Susannah Wesley, the mother of John and Charles Wesley, had 20 children. She made a rule to spend at least one hour alone with each one of them each week. Maybe that was the secret of the spiritual strength of her two famous sons.

Wives and husbands need time alone with each other as well as children. We learn to love our marriage partners when we're alone together with them. When was the last time you spent a couple hours alone with your marriage partner? When was the last time you splurged and went out to dinner together? You may be thinking, "Well, I can't afford a fancy restaurant with candles and orchestra." Then take a candle and a portable radio with you to the Burger King. Order you Big Whopper, light your candle and tune in the radio to some romantic music. You might even see Herb. Romance shouldn't be the monopoly of the rich. We learn to love our families when we spend time with them.

I've talked about learning to love our families. *Now how can we learn to love our friends better?* David and Jonathan loved one another ~~as friends~~. David says of Jonathan, "Your love for me was wonderful, more wonderful than that of women." We're told that "Jonathan became one in spirit with David, and he loved him as himself." That language probably makes a lot of us feel uncomfortable. I've even heard ridiculous arguments that David and Jonathan were homosexuals because their love for one another surpassed that of women.

But anyone who's experienced a deep bond of friendship with a person of the same sex knows that love rarely has anything sexual about it. The fear of homosexuality, known as homophobia, is so great among some Christians that any close, warm, loving relationship among two men or two women is highly suspect. For some reason, unknown to me, people whose cultural background is Northern European, tend to be so reserved about expressions of love towards friends. I'm that way myself.

We suffer unless we're able to learn how to love one another as friends. How many of us have real friends as opposed to acquaintances? How many

of us have a friend with whom you could share anything without the relationship being threatened?

A professional counselor once told me that every married couple should have at least 20 friends in common. He said that the lack of friendship is at the root of a lot of divorce. It used to be that a couple got married and lived in the same town with all their relatives. There was a built in support system to keep marriages working. The wife had sisters and aunts as well as a mother to talk with and work alongside of. Today, though, many of us grow up and move far away from our families. Without close friends a husband and wife can come to feel very isolated, lonely and unsupported in rough times.

I've talked now, first, about learning to love our families; secondly, ~~learning to love our friends;~~ and now, *third, I want to say something about learning to love one another as Christians.* Pastors often feel a kind of despair because there are times when they have to try to keep peace among the various factions into which congregations are always threatening to divide; conflicts between men and women, conflicts between young and old, conflicts between traditionalists and iconoclasts, conflicts between liberals and conservatives, conflicts between high-church and low-church Christians. There are times when Christians hold long grudges against other Christians.

We need to learn to love one another as Christians. We need to work constantly at it. St. Paul wrote, "Be devoted to one another in brotherly love. Honor one another above yourselves. Share with God's people who are in need. Practice hospitality. Do not be proud."

I remember an incident that took place in my last church. There was division in the church. The issue was of great theological importance that

would affect all future generations of Christians in the church either for good or for ill. The issue was whether or not to have a square dance in the church fellowship hall. It had never been done before. There were strong feelings that it should never be done. I called a special session meeting. I couldn't sleep very well the night before the meeting. I envisioned all sorts of terrible things happening. The motion was made to have the square dance and the issue was thoroughly discussed, all sides were given the opportunity to speak. We debated pro and con the biblical and theological basis for and against square dancing in the church. The vote was taken. The square dancers won. I was afraid of how the anti-square dancers would react since feelings were running high. After the vote was taken one of the most conservative and vocal elders wanted to make another motion. ~~Would it be something motivated out of hurt and anger?~~ Since the issue had been narrowly decided by majority vote he moved that the session leave that evening with a message to the congregation that the session unanimously approves the square-dance. It was passed. A potentially divisive issue turned out to lead to healing. And some of those who voted against the square-dance came to the church social and thoroughly enjoyed themselves. What a beautiful expression of love and graciousness was expressed by the losing side.

I know that this church has stories as remarkable. We're blessed by having such diversity in this church. Diversity is a strength, not a weakness or a problem. Think of the people Jesus called to be his disciples; Matthew the tax-collector in cahoots with the Roman oppressors and Simon the revolutionary freedom fighting zealot; the intuitive John who believed Jesus had risen from the dead without having seen him and doubting Thomas who would not believe without hard

evidence. Jesus called men, women, Gentile and Jew, rich and poor, conservative and liberal and taught them all how to love one another. It's a beautiful and attractive thing to see Christians of such diverse points of view learning to love one another, being devoted to one another in love, and working together for Christ and his kingdom.

Finally, seldom can we offer to others much truly self-giving love until we've received it from the Divine Lover in one way or another. How do we know that God loves us? How can we be sure that he's the loving pursuer down our nights and down our days? Because God became flesh in Jesus of Nazareth. He healed the sick. He loved the unloved. And on the cross he loved us to death. He loved us so much that he took our sins upon himself and gave to us his goodness and his very life. This morning I hope and pray that each one of us will see more clearly our need of his love and grace and will open our hearts and minds and wills to his loving embrace so that we can, in turn, learn better to love others; family, friends, and fellow Christians. Then this town will *know* that we are Christians by our love.

Amen

Let us pray: