

COM Sermon
“Laying Down Our Lives”
John 15:9-17
May 10, 2015
by Missy Harris

I gave myself a little bit of a challenge this week. I preached from this text back in the Fall, but it showed up in the lectionary for today, so if you were paying attention back then, you’ll know if I preaching the exact same sermon tonight or not.

Honestly, that’s the beauty and the mystery of the Gospels. They are living stories, stories that we can return to again and again, seeing things from a different angle, noticing nuances that make us pause and consider the words as if we are hearing them again for the first time.

Here’s what caught my attention this week:

Last words hold power. When I was working at the hospital with Life Share and the organ donation team, I heard many stories about the importance of last words. I sat with family members and friends of people who had experienced strokes, head injuries, drug overdoses and other unimaginable tragedies – events from which they were unlikely to recover.

In those hospital rooms, I heard wives trying to recall what they had said to their husbands that very morning; friends filled with grief wishing that they had arrived a few hours earlier; parents filled with gratitude that they had told their children that they loved them when they had last seen each other.

I would venture to guess that we all have held close the last words we heard from one who was dear to us.

Our text tonight was written within a community several decades after Jesus' death. It was written within a community that needed to be reminded of Jesus' last words, his last interactions with those closest to him. They were recalling Jesus' last words from the stories that had been passed down to them. They needed to be bathed in the sweetness of the words, reminded of the promises made, the encouragement offered, and what was expected of them.

In this scene Jesus is speaking with the disciples on the topic of the greatest love that one can offer, giving them advice about how their joy may be made complete, encouraging them to abide in the love that he has shown them, assuring them that he has told them everything that was made known to him by God. It is a poignant story of grace, drenched in loving words from Jesus.

Jesus reminded the disciples that he had chosen them. They didn't have to do anything to be worthy of Jesus' call. He chose them – knowing their flaws, knowing their weaknesses, knowing it was possible that one would deny him or that one would betray him. He chose the disciples IN love and he urged them to BE love in the world – even when that seemed impossible.

I think Anne Lamotte gets it right in her book *Traveling Mercies*. When Jesus instructs the disciples to abide in the love he has shown to them, he is talking about the love he has modeled in his relationships with them and others they met along the way. It's the kind of love that draws others in, the kind of love that just seems to pour out endless amounts of grace and mercy.

Lamotte says, “It is unearned love--the love that goes before, that greets us on the way. It's the help you receive when you have no bright ideas left, when you are empty and desperate and have discovered that your best thinking and most charming charm have failed you. Grace is the light or electricity or juice or breeze that takes you from that isolated place and puts you with others who are as startled and embarrassed and eventually grateful as you are to be there.”

-Anne Lamotte *Traveling Mercies*

Jesus is describing a love that has gone before, a love that has shown up along the journey, and whether they expected it or not, whether they deserved it or not, it was offered freely and in abundance, and he was telling them that it's THIS kind of love that they can bet their lives on.

It's the kind of love, when you see it or experience it, you can't get enough of it. It's the kind of love that puts others who cross your path at ease. It's the kind of love – that when we sense it in others – we long to be in their presence, to experience the mysterious inner light that seems to radiate from their spirits.

A while back, Russell Jones sent me an article from the New York Times written by David Brooks, who is a regular columnist for the Times. I think some of you also may have received the link to the article from Russell. In the article, Brooks describes the virtues that are extolled and celebrated by our culture and educational systems, and he names these resume virtues – basically the skills that you develop and cultivate to bring to the marketplace – the things you write down on your resume. He juxtaposes resume virtues with what he terms “eulogy virtues.” “Eulogy virtues are the ones that are talked about at your funeral – whether you were kind, brave, honest or faithful – were you capable of deep love?”¹

¹ David Brooks, excerpt from *The Road to Character* in New York Times – “The Moral Bucket List,” April 11, 2015.

It is the cultivation and living into eulogy virtues that enable us to live lives that radiate an inner strength and light. And I think these are the things that Jesus was talking about when he encouraged the disciples to love one another as he had loved them.

We bear witness to the presence of these kind of virtues when we experience ourselves or others:

- being honest about weaknesses
- confronting weaknesses and building strength in those fragile places
- cultivating deep connections that hold us up in times that are filled with challenge, connections that push us toward what is good
- living in response to energizing love that gets us beyond a focus on ourselves²

Jesus' relationship with the disciples was changing. This was a major turning point in how their relationship was defined. He no longer called them servants, but he began to call them friends.

² David Brooks, excerpt from *The Road to Character* in New York Times – “The Moral Bucket List,” April 11, 2015.

In some ways, I wonder if Jesus was “freeing them up” – so to speak – when he called them friends, rather than servants. At the very time when they were feeling most vulnerable and fearful, on the cusp of the time when they would abandon Jesus completely in the hour he most needed them to be by his side, he called them friends, which indicated an intimate, close relationship, a very human kind of relationship, a way of being in relationship that could hold them at their very best, as well as at their very worst.

As we know, friendship can be a powerful force in our lives and in the world. I have been thinking about friendships a lot lately, partly because of this scripture and partly because for the two weekends previous to this one, my five dearest, closest friends have visited from Baltimore, Richmond, Atlanta and Olympia.

As I think about these particular friendships, I recognize that my relationships with them have held an unbelievable amount of love and grace. They have seen me at my best – those moments when I have managed to be brave and kind and faithful. But, they have also seen me at my worst, offering to me, in those moments that “unearned love” that Anne Lamotte talks about. They have extended help and heaped grace upon me when I have failed them, when I have hurt them, when I’ve had no bright ideas left, when I’ve been empty and desperate and have discovered that my best

thinking and most charming charm have failed me. These friends have extended to me a deep and abiding love that I sometimes haven't even known how to receive.

I hope that you, too, have known this kind of deep and abiding love.

Recently, when several of us from our congregation and members of Land of the Sky spent the day with some of the women from the Swannanoa Prison and their teenage children, I caught some glimpses of this kind of love as it is manifested in our lives as human beings – in all its beauty and messiness:

Here are some of the places I saw what I think is the kind of deep and abiding love that Jesus talked about with his friends:

You know the game where you invite people to place themselves along a continuum based on a series of questions? We used this game at the retreat. During the game, there were easy questions like “chocolate or bacon” interspersed with more challenging statements, like “It’s easy to stand up to a bully.” I saw a deep and abiding kind of love when, in response to this question, a teenage boy ran from his end of the continuum (where he was saying that it was easy to stand up to bullies) over the other end of the continuum where his mom was standing, grabbing her by

the hand and saying to her as he walked her back to his side (You can do this mom. You've got this.)

I saw it during the challenge course when one of the moms asked if she could say something. She shared that she learned that day that her son had been carrying around a poem that she wrote for him in his wallet. She had no idea that he kept it with him all the time. With his permission, she read it to us all. It described her love for him – the pain and agony, the beauty and tenderness that it has held over the years.

I saw this deep and abiding love in a child whose mother had only told her a few weeks before this retreat where she really was – her child clinging to her side the entire day, never seeming to be able to get close enough to her.

I saw it when the children surrounded their moms at the end of the day, naming their hopes and prayers for them. And then the circle reversed, the moms surrounding their children, whispering their hopes and prayers to them.

A quote from one of the women after the retreat, “The kids love you exactly the same as if you were perfect.”

I share these particular stories, not because it's Mother's Day, but because they are the most powerful, real-life, flesh and blood stories that I have had the opportunity to bear witness to recently that gave me a tiny glimpse of the beautiful, heart-breaking and heart-expanding kind of abiding love that I think Jesus was calling his friends to in John. It's a love that has already chosen us. It's a love that frees us up and offers to us more than we even know how to receive, even when – or maybe most especially when we have failed to meet the expectations of ourselves or those closest to us.

One thing I know deep in my bones: I need to find the places like this in my own life where I can lay down my life and abide in this deep love, that chooses us, that holds us at our best and at our worst, that is made known to us both in the flesh and blood stories of Jesus and in the flesh and blood stories of our daily lives.

This deep and abiding love is available to us all, if we can allow ourselves to be open to receiving it. We can't create or manufacture it. All we can do is get out of the way by being honest about our weaknesses and recognizing that our greatest strengths can emerge from those fragile places; by cultivating deep connections that sustain us in times of adversity or challenge and push us toward what is good; and by joining in with the energizing love that focuses on something or someone beyond ourselves. Be on the lookout for evidence of this deep and abiding love within and around you. It's there, waiting to be recognized and received.

Hear again these words from the poet Hafiz:

What happens
when your soul begins to awaken
your eyes
And your heart
And the cells of your body
To the great Journey of Love?
First there is wonderful laughter
And probably precious tears
And a hundred sweet promises
And those heroic vows no one can ever keep.
But still God is delighted and amused you once tried to be a saint.
What happens when your soul begins to awake in this world?
To our deep need to love and serve the Friend?
O the Beloved will send you one of these wonderful, wild companions...

Amen.

Benediction

Friends, go from here, knowing that we have the capacity to be kind, brave, honest, faithful and capable of deep love. In our successes as well as our failures, God's abiding love and friendship surround and enfold us, urging and cheering us on as we keep laying down our lives alongside each other.