

Love Without Limits

John 14:15-21

If you love me, you will keep my commandments. And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Helper, to be with you forever, even the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees him nor knows him. You know him, for he dwells with you and will be in you. I will not leave you as orphans; I will come to you. Yet a little while and the world will see me no more, but you will see me. Because I live, you also will live. In that day you will know that I am in my Father, and you in me, and I in you. Whoever has my commandments and keeps them, he it is who loves me. And he who loves me will be loved by my Father, and I will love him and manifest myself to him.

In his book, "This Incredible Century," Norman Vincent Peale tells this story about Babe Ruth.

The Babe was in the twilight of his unparalleled career, playing for the Cincinnati Reds. Strike outs were now more frequent for him than his memorable home runs, and errors were beginning to creep into his fielding. After one of his poor showings at the plate, the Babe put his head on his chest and began to walk back to the dugout while the whole crowd booed this once great ball player. Suddenly, a small boy with tears running down his face ran out onto the field and threw his arms around the Babe's legs. The Babe, himself an unwanted child, had a big heart for kids. He reached down, lifted the boy into his arms, and cradled against his massive chest they continued the walk to the dugout. The crowd went silent and one by one they rose to their feet. The silence prevailed over the ball park even after the little boy and the Babe reached the dugout. It is still considered one of the most moving episodes in the history of baseball.

Babe Ruth had gone from loss to gain to loss again. He knew the pain of being rejected by his father, the joy of fame, and now the pain of having once loyal fans turn on him. Yet in the midst of his pain he experienced the joy of love. This young boy showed the Babe and the world that it doesn't matter what you've done it matters WHO you are. In a very real way, this young boy shows us all what LOVE WITHOUT LIMITS means. The Babe had not earned this young boy's love; he was given this boy's love as an unexpected gift.

So, how was your week? Were you batting 1000, at the top of your game, keeping all the commandments the way the Bible encourages us to do, or was this past week one that found you breaking commandments right and left, striking out, head on your chest, headed for the dugout to the sounds of boos and jeers? In the midst of the joys, the sorrows, the worries, the hassles, did you sense that Jesus was there walking beside you? Did you hear His voice saying, "I love you. Just as you are. Right where you are I love you!" Wouldn't that be wonderful just once, to hear the voice of Jesus right beside you saying, "I love you!" or to feel the strength and warmth of His embrace when you weren't expecting it when you hadn't polished yourself up and brushed yourself off, when you were down and out?

The disciples had that experience with Jesus. They were LOVED FIRST by Him before he asked their love in return. Jesus called each one of them personally to follow Him on His journey. For three years He walked by their side, taught them, laughed with them, ate with them, spent long days traveling in the heat of Palestine and cool evenings chatting about the events. In the midst of their everyday lives He walked up beside them, loved them, called them to follow and how their lives changed. They experienced how Jesus loved and cared for them and others through all sorts of signs and wonders and in the everyday moments.

Then, as He is headed for the cross, Jesus is sharing His heart openly with His disciples and telling these men who had grown accustomed to His presence and His love that He will never leave them alone, "I will not leave you as orphans; I will come to you." (V.18) Jesus assured the disciples that even His death would not sever the love relationship He had with them.

Funny thing. It is hard to believe that Jesus chose this ragged bunch of followers because they were somehow better or more spiritual than others. He hadn't sorted resumes and said, "I like the four fishermen, the tax collector, the zealot...and that youngster John great potential to write, that one, he'll be a man of visions." He called them because from before the foundations of the world He had known them, loved them, and called them according to His purpose just as He has known and loved YOU and ME from ETERNITY and calls us to carry out His purpose in our lives.

During the meal Jesus had shared with His disciples before this text, He spoke of His coming death. But He didn't want His disciples to fear His leaving because His love would go beyond death.

This love that Jesus had for them was far more than an earthly love. He reminded the disciples that they were LOVED for a LIFETIME not only by Him but by the Father, also. They would not be left alone in the world; the Father would send one to comfort them, one who would be with them forever.

"I am in my Father, and you are in me, and I am in you." The LOVE OF GOD is in you and me, changing us, cleansing us, making us new, beautiful creations.

An old story tells of an ugly man who wanted to win the heart of a beautiful girl. Because the man's face was severely disfigured, he had a mask made that gave him the appearance of a handsome man and he vowed never to take it off. Well, he won the heart of the girl, and they were married. Their love grew and grew through the years but he would never take his mask off. One day, his wife asked him to take the mask off for her, for regardless of how he looked beneath it, she loved him with all her heart and always would. Trusting her love, he removed the mask, only to find that his face was no longer disfigured. He was truly handsome underneath it.

The story suggests the mask reconfigured his face, but I believe it was the love. Love does that. You know the love of Christ constrains us, shapes us, forms us and makes us new from within. In love, Christ comes to you today to ask you to take off your masks, not so He can see your face He knows everything about you. The masks you wear don't work with Him and never have. Instead, in the body of Christ, in this place where His love is to be evident to all, He asks you to trust the people of this fellowship, your brothers and sisters in Christ, to risk being yourself, your true self, your new self in Him and to "love one another." His love is right there beside you hugging you, holding your hand, giving you the courage to be free and honest with Him and with others.

The Gift of love has come to you through the power of the Holy Spirit who lives within you and me through baptism. You have the ability

which is God-given to love others as God has loved you. Not to love them for who they are or what they've done but because they are people that God loves just as He loves you, warts and all. The depth of God's love is hard to imagine. Yet, sometimes it's difficult to believe that His love for me is possible. In my mind I know and believe that the well of God's grace is deep beyond belief...but is all that grace for me? I know God can love even the worst of sinners, the most notorious criminal, but does He really love me when I can't love others, when I don't want to help that hopeless person, when I've been the most grumpy, the most critical, the most negative, the least godly to the people I'm supposed to be closest to.

God does love you and he does love me THAT MUCH.

Love has to take a shape. Jesus shared words of comfort with His disciples so that they would experience His love for them. How these words must have burned in their hearts when, suddenly, He was gone from them - murdered. How abandoned they must have felt. How incredible His resurrection must have seemed the fulfillment of the promise He had made. St. John knew that you would need those words too and me, so he recorded them. Enriched in God's Word, washed clean in His baptism, strengthened at His table, filled with His Spirit of Love we are now given the strength to love. "Love one another as I have loved you" is God's new command, and by the power and love of the Holy Spirit mothers, fathers, sisters, brothers, bosses, employees, students, seniors, sweethearts, and people you've hurt or who've hurt -- you can keep that command.

We are the bearers of God's love for the world. There are so many people waiting to know that someone loves them, and we have the wonderful opportunity to be the gift of God's love to them. Keeping God's command to love is possible. Filled with the Spirit, walking each step of our lives with Him, we can dare to move forward and give our love to others, knowing that whether we fail or succeed we are offering God's love to others. Keeping God's commandments, then, becomes an act of love to our neighbors and the people in our own homes or workplaces. It is possible to love God and others not because we are strong BUT BECAUSE WE ARE LOVED!

This coming week, remind yourself that you are a gift placed on this earth for others. Find a

place -- a nursing home, a hospital, a classroom, a Bible Study, a service organization -- where you can honestly love, take off your mask, and let others see the beauty of Jesus in you!

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