

Love Songs  
A sermon by David Roquemore  
First Presbyterian Church  
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John 13:31-35

Jesus says, “I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.” (John 13:34-35)

Paul McCartney once asked in a song, What is wrong with filling the world with silly love songs? Indeed; he has done his share of it! The world is filled with songs about love: and our commandment today from the gospel is a love song as well. Let’s think about some love songs; some of which you have probably never heard.

“All you need is love” sang the Beatles; then they broke up. So observes Larry Norman, who himself had a minor hit years and years ago with a song called, “I Love You.” All we need is love. That seems to be true to what Jesus says. Why then do we have such trouble loving one another? Why indeed, after making a career of singing it, did the Fab Four have so much trouble living it?

Why do we have trouble loving one another? That has to do with how we love and what we mean by love. Partly our trouble is that our love is often selfish. Think about how many songs there are celebrating the way that love makes “me” feel. It isn’t the other person who is loved so much as it is the feelings I have that are celebrated. Often our love songs celebrate the feelings of infatuation, and infatuation’s primary meaning is “to make a fool of.” We are made a fool for love. Sounds like a song!

“If loving you is wrong, I don’t want to be right.” There is a fool in love, following folly. This notion of love has to do with my feelings. Well, love that is based on feeling is not bound for glory, because, as we all know, feelings change with the weather. Feelings are important; we tend to deny them too much. But we cannot consign love to a feeling; it is more than that.

“What’s Love Got To Do With It?” screams Tina Turner, queen of rhythm and blues. Beyond infatuation and selfishness lies self-gratification. That is another part of the problem. We want to feel good. We are not interested in the other at all, only in our own pleasure. What’s love go to do with it? Why, nothing. This isn’t love at all. This is self-love. This is selfishness taken all the way. The other only matters to me as long as I am satisfied and feel good. Beyond that, the other person is useless, only good for what I can use them for. That path obviously takes us away from love entirely.

C. S. Lewis in The Four Loves made a useful distinction between Need-love and Gift-love. Obviously we have been talking about Need-loves, which can easily

degenerate into selfish preoccupation. There is nothing wrong with our needs: we must have our basic human needs met in order to live. But contrasted with Gift-loves, we find that indeed there is more to life than bread alone!

“Loving you is easy cause your beautiful” sang Minnie Ripperton. Well, she is right, but is that true love? It is easy to love the beautiful people; what about others? Is love about appreciation of what is lovely and beautiful? This gets to the heart of what love is. Gift-love is loving others for who they are, *even if they are not beautiful!* And here is something difficult. Jesus calls us in the Church to love one another. But, dear Jesus, what do I do with *that* person? You know the one I mean, the one who is not lovely, who is obnoxious, who grates on me at every turn? We all have that attitude, don’t we, toward someone? Perhaps at the church, or at work, or even in a family, there is bound to be someone we find terribly difficult to love.

And so maybe we just need more love! With enough love, if we try hard enough to love, perhaps we shall succeed in loving those who are hard to love. ‘Way back in 1976, The Captain and Tennille sang “Love Will Keep Us Together.” Surely they were right, weren’t they? This makes love into a magic sort of ‘stuff,’ an emotional glue that exists apart from who we are and what we do. But love is a verb; love is what we do, first and foremost.

Sometimes we misuse love. We know it is a verb, but we still get it wrong. I recall a song by The Who, in which the singer says “When I say I love you, you say ‘you better!’” Love is a weapon. A tool for manipulation. To be withheld or withdrawn if we don’t get what we want from the other. We demand that others love us. We love those who meet our approval, who do what we like. No, this kind of love doesn’t keep us together. It drives us apart.

We need love, but we need more than love. What is the more? If love is the fuel that drives the gathering of the faithful, then forgiveness is the oil. Love includes forgiveness and forbearance. Jesus said we are to love as he does, and that includes these things. And so love means never having to say “you better.” Love doesn’t love *if*, or love *because*. Love just loves, after the model of Jesus, and more to the point, because of the grace of God that comes to us in the person of the Holy Spirit, dwelling in us, and giving us the gift of love that makes us able to love God and one another.

I am not going to mention the three Greek words for love (actually there are 4 or 5) and what they mean. If I were to mention them, I would tell you simply that the Greeks made the distinctions clear between filial love, the love of friendship, erotic desire, and sacrificial self-giving. The love that Jesus commands is the last, the love that gives of itself because it wants the best for the other. It is forgiving, patient, and long-suffering.

Love hurts. Love wounds. Believe it or not, those too are lyrics to an old song, written by a fellow with the improbable name of Boudleaux Bryant. Yes, love

hurts. Suffering is involved. True love involves sacrifice and self-denial; in other words, suffering. To do what is best and right for the other person can and often does involve suffering. Ask any mother on this Mother's Day, and you will hear about this. Ask children who have had the difficult task of caring for aging, ill parents.

Ask Jesus. He knows about the wounds of love. He knows about suffering. He knew full well when he gave the disciples this commandment that it wouldn't be easy to obey. He knew that our basic selfishness and our attraction to the lovely would cause us trouble. He knew that we would need help with this.

Neil Young, of all people, "Love is rose but you better not pick it; it only grows when it's on the vine." Yes, there is great truth there. We cannot love, our love will not grow, unless we remain connected to the vine. The Vine, Jesus Christ. He is the vine and we are the branches. To be connected in faith to Jesus is what enables us to be the community of those who love.

Notice what Jesus says. The love that we share is to be such that everyone will know we are his disciples. The love that we have should make it obvious that we are Jesus' followers. Does it?

Another thing he says, this is the love that we have for one another: they are to see it in our community. We are not talking only about whether we are loving in general, but specifically whether the gathered community here is first and foremost a community that loves, that cares, that takes care of those who hurt, who suffer, who are ill, who grieve, who are wounded, who are not whole. Do we love them, or do we wait for others to do it for us?

The love that binds us as a community comes from God. It is God's gift of grace to us, it is that Gift-love that C. S. Lewis spoke of. It is grace made visible in our day-to-day exchanges and attitudes. That love is what makes the gathering become the Church.

It isn't without standards. Sometimes we hear love spoken of as if it simply means giving the other person whatever he or she might want. That isn't healthy. We give people what is good for them, not simply what they have an appetite for, if we love them. Sometimes it is said that the "loving thing" is to give people what they ask for. If God did that for us, would be happy? No, the love that God gives us has standards, it pulls us up to become better people, it convicts, converts, and consecrates us. It changes us. It draws us together and over time we learn how to love God and one another, truly. It is grace.

In baptism we make promises that relate to this love. We say that this child is included in God's covenant of grace, and that we will love this child and her parents: unreservedly in the name of Christ. We will reach and teach them. We will hold them accountable to God for their promises, just as God holds us accountable to them. We are all connected to the vine, and we love one another.

Another song? There is that great poem in the hymnal, Of The Father's Love Begotten. There is also, Love Divine All Love's Excelling. Both of these describe God's love for us and get to the heart of the matter: that God loves us so deeply that we simply ought to love one another out of gratitude for his amazing grace.

Thanks be to God!  
Amen.