

Love One Another

John 13:31-35

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I think the story I am about to tell you was set in Africa. A boy appeared at a woman's door one day and asked for a job as a domestic servant. She hired him but was surprised when after three months he asked her for a letter of recommendation to Sheik Ali bin Salim, a Muslim who lived in a nearby town. She offered to raise his pay in order to keep him, but he said no, money was not his interest. He had decided to become either a Christian or a Muslim, and his purpose in working for the woman had been to see, up close, the way a Christian lived. Now that he had worked for the woman and seen the ways of a Christian, he would go and observe Sheik Ali to see how Muslims behave; then he would decide. As the boy leaves the woman remembers wishing the boy had told her that before he came to live with her.¹

That story caught me up short. I immediately identified with the woman telling the story. No fair, not telling me you were going to watch me to see what my Christian faith meant. I would have...um, I don't know exactly what, but I would have...regardless, you should have told me. You should have warned me and given me notice.

But I know that excuse falls flat on its face. The child didn't need to warn or give notice that he was watching the woman to see how she lived as a Christian. The woman had already been warned and given notice and set on alert that others would be watching how she lived. And so have I. I have been given notice. And so have you. In fact, Jesus gathers all his disciples together in John 13 and warns them and gives them notice and prepares them and commands them how they are to live. We all are on notice. We all have been warned. We all have been commanded. In the simplest and most straightforward terms, Jesus speaks to us as children. "My children, a new command I give you: Love one another." If that wasn't clear enough he says it again. "As I have loved you, love one another." Still unclear? Fine. "By this all people, all

¹ Gary Jones, *Feasting on the Word*, Year C Volume 2, p.472. (Jones is recounting a portion of Isak Dinesen's book *Out of Africa*)

men, all women, all children, all girls, and all little boys (even little boys working as your domestic servant in Africa) will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another.” Even so, even though we are so clearly commanded to love one another because others are watching, because the world is watching, my guess is each and every one of us finds ourselves wishing we had been more intentional about how we live out our Christian faith. My guess is each and every one of us wishes we had been more intentional about how we loved one another.

Knowing that we all fall short and we all miss opportunities and more than likely we all have regrets, let me move our time together in a new direction. Instead of opportunities we missed, what if someone actually made the most of their opportunity to love one another. On a day when Jesus has gathered his disciples and called them, “My children,” maybe a children’s story is just what we need. Especially a children’s story where someone gets it right in terms of loving one another.

The title of this story is *I’ll Love You Forever*.

A mother held her new baby and very slowly rocked him back and forth, back and forth, back and forth. And while she held him, she sang:

“I’ll love you forever,
I’ll like you for always,
As long as I’m living
My baby you’ll be.

The baby grew. He grew and he grew and he grew. He grew until he was two years old, and he ran all around the house. He pulled all the books off the shelves. He pulled all the food out of the refrigerator and he took his mother’s watch and flushed it down the toilet. Sometimes his mother would say, “This kid is driving me CRAZY!”

But at night time, when that two-year-old was quiet, she opened the door to his room, crawled across the floor, looked up over the side of his bed; and if he was really asleep she picked him up and rocked him back and forth, back and forth, back and forth. While she rocked him she sang:

“I’ll love you forever,
I’ll like you for always,
As long as I’m living
My baby you’ll be.

The little boy grew. He grew and he grew and he grew. He grew until he was nine years old, when he never wanted to come to dinner and he never wanted to take a bath. He grew and he grew until he was a teenager, when he had strange friends and he wore strange clothes and he listened to strange music. He grew and he grew and he grew until he was a grown up man and had moved across town. He grew and he grew and he grew until he had a child of his own. And this simple and wonderful story tells us that at every stop on the journey of life this mother would sneak up to her son’s bed and she would hold him in her arms and she would sing about loving him forever...

...even when he was a grown man.

...even when he moved to his own house.

...even when he had his own child.

...until finally she was too old to get out of her own bed. One day she called up her son and said, “You’d better come see me because I’m old and sick.” So her son came to see her. When he came in the door she tried to sing the song. She sang:

“I’ll love you forever, I’ll like you for always...”

But she couldn’t finish because she was too old and sick.

The son went to his mother. He picked her up and rocked her back and forth, back and forth, back and forth. And he sang this song:

“I’ll love you forever, I’ll like you for always,
As long as I’m living, my Mommy you’ll be.

When the son came home that night, he stood for a long time at the top of the stairs.

Then he went into the room where his very new baby daughter was sleeping. He picked her up in his arms and very slowly rocked her back and forth, back and forth, back and forth. And while he rocked her he sang:

“I’ll love you forever, I’ll like you for always,
As long as I’m living, my Mommy you’ll be.”²

That story about a mother who said to her baby boy that “I’ll love you forever” was very meaningful in our home, reminding us at every age and every stage to do everything we could to show our children we loved them. In the story, it all works. The mother shows her love and then the son, having been the recipient of that love, not only loves his mother, he also passes on that same love to his child.

But this morning we aren’t talking about a mother who loves her child. We are talking about Jesus Christ, the Son of God. We are not saying, “As a mother loves her child...” as sweet and touching as that might be. We hear Jesus, God’s Beloved Son saying, “As I have loved you, so you must love one another.”

He is with his disciples, the ones nearest and dearest to him. Can you imagine him looking them in the eye and saying,

- Levi, I love you. I found you sitting at a tax collectors table tied to money and dishonest gain, ostracized and criticized by others, but that doesn’t change a thing. I love you.
- James and John, I love you. You dropped the ball on that day I told you I was on my way to a painful death and you conveniently forgot that as you started an argument about who gets to sit in the seat closest to me in the kingdom of heaven. But that doesn’t change a thing. I love you.
- Thomas, there you sit stewing in your many doubts, unable to believe the others when they give an eyewitness account that I’m alive. But that doesn’t change a thing. I love you.

² Written by Robert Munsch and Illustrated by Sheila McGraw.

- Judas, if you hadn't just snuck out to do your dirty deed I could tell you...well, even so, I love you.
- And Peter... I love you Peter. Soon you are going to turn your back on me and deny you even know me, but that doesn't change a thing. I love you.

As I have loved you, so you must love one another. As I reached out and touched the leper, as I blessed the children, as I bathed in the hot tears of a sinful woman, as I shed my own tears with the two sisters at the tomb of Lazarus, now it is time for you to do these very things for one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. As I took off my outer garments and wrapped a towel around my waist and then held your feet in my hands and washed them, so you must serve one another. So you must love one another. That washing of the feet, which happened right before Jesus has this crucial conversation with his little children, points him directly toward the cross, where he will love his disciples, where he will love all of us, where he will love the world in the fullest and most sacrificial way, by laying down his life for his friends. As he has loved us so we must love one another.

I want to tell you some good news. Just like that mother in the beautiful story of *I'll Love You Forever* got it right, sometimes we get it right. It's not that we climb into bed with each other and sing a song of love. But maybe we learn from the one who washed our feet what it means to love one another. There is a story that means so much to me I tell it often, and today I share it because not only do I love the story, but the story itself was told in the context of Jesus' command to love one another.

Jesus said, "As I have loved you, so you must love one another." Years ago a young mother suffered a tragic loss, with several close family members dying in an automobile accident. The young mother told of how she was numbed by the news and was having difficulty accomplishing the necessary tasks to prepare for their flight back to Missouri to be with her family. At that point, a friend stopped by and simply said he was there to polish their shoes. In response to her surprised look he recounted how during a family tragedy it had taken him over an hour to polish all the family's shoes. Watching this friend

sitting on the kitchen floor polishing all their shoes reminded her of someone else sitting on the floor washing people's feet, a simple act of presence and service. "Now, whenever I hear of an acquaintance who has lost a loved one, I no longer call with the vague offer, 'If there's anything I can do...' Now I try to think of one specific task that suits that person's need—such as washing the family car, taking the dogs to the boarding kennel, or housesitting during the funeral. And if the person says to me, 'How did you know I needed that done?' I reply 'It's because a man once cleaned my shoes.'" ³

No, we don't have to climb into bed with each other and sing a song of love. That is not what a small church in Beirut, Lebanon did. But what they did do is a powerful example of loving others. *In the mid-1980s, Fuad Bahnan was pastor of a small church in Beirut, Lebanon. In 1983, the armies of Israel marched into Lebanon. Anticipating that the armies would lay siege to Beirut, Bahnan's congregation purchased and stockpiled large amounts of food and water. They were right, of course. The siege came. West Beirut was totally cut off. The session of Pastor Bahnan's church met again, this time to make arrangements for distributing the food and water they had stockpiled.*

At that session meeting, two different proposals came to the table. The first went like this: The food would be distributed first to members of the congregation; then, as supplies permitted, to other Christians in West Beirut; and lastly, if any was left over, to the Muslims. The second proposal on the table was quite different. This motion was that the food and water be distributed first to Muslim neighbors; then to nonmember Christians; and lastly, if there was any left over, to members of the church.

*The session meeting lasted six hours. It ended when an older, much-respected elder, a woman, stood up, and cried out, "If we do not demonstrate the love of Jesus Christ in this place, who will?" The second proposal was passed. The food was distributed first to Muslims, then to Christians and finally to the members of the church. There was enough for everyone. It is said that the Muslims in West Beirut still talk about this congregation.*⁴

³ Alyce McKenzie, "Preaching Biblical Wisdom in a Self-Help Society, 138, 139.

⁴ Michael Lindvall, *The Christian Life*, from a sermon Rev. Tom Are preached at Village Presbyterian Church

Let me say again, we don't have to climb in bed with each other and sing a song of love. Tony and Sandy taught me so much about love. I met them at a very difficult time. A member in our church committed suicide. Tony and Sandy came to the memorial service to grieve the loss of their friend. We were all devastated. In God's grace, Tony and Sandy found something that was missing in their lives through the grieving process. They decided to join the church. Tony and Sandy were older, having already celebrated their 50th wedding anniversary. But they had told me they didn't belong to a church and had never been baptized. They joined our church. They were baptized. At the baptism it became very clear Tony had never belonged to a church, at least a Presbyterian Church. When I baptized Tony, he thrust his arms in the air and shouted out, "Yes!" That doesn't happen too often in a Presbyterian Church, us being the frozen chosen and all that decently and in order stuff. We didn't know what to do when Tony threw up his arms at his baptism. So after a few awkward moments, we threw up our arms and shouted right back at him. "Yes!"

We quickly became very close friends with Tony and Sandy. We were all living in Houston, but found out Tony and Sandy shared a California connection with us. They took a love to our children. We feel so blessed that our kids grew up in the church. Sometimes churches can be hard on pastor's kids, but everywhere we have been, our kids have been accepted and nurtured and encouraged and loved. Tony and Sandy had a special love for our oldest son Jake, who was about 20 at the time. Sometimes when we would travel back to California, Jake would stay behind because of his job. Sandy called him up and invited him to dinner while we were gone. She said he stayed until late at night, talking with them and enjoying their friendship.

About a year after they joined Sandy was diagnosed with cancer. She was a very petite woman, and as the cancer took its toll she shrunk down. Finally Tony took her to a hospice facility. One Sunday after church I told Julie I was going to visit Sandy in hospice. Julie decided to come along. Jake was hanging around and so she asked if he wanted to come. The three of us went and we sat with Tony and Sandy for a while. I said a prayer. I prayed about the Lord being our Shepherd and walking with us through the valley of the shadow of death. Then we all stepped

out in the hall and left Sandy to rest. I gave Tony a big hug and got ready to leave. Julie looked at me and I looked at her and we realized we didn't have Jake. I looked up and down the hall. He was gone. At that point Julie signaled to me to come back into the room. Our son, twenty years old, had climbed into the bed with Sandy. He wasn't singing a song, but in the sweetest way he was telling this precious child of God that he loved her forever. And he was assuring her that God loved her. No, we don't have to climb in bed with each other and sing a song of love. But sometimes that is exactly what we do.

So I guess I'm right when I say we've all been warned, we've all been given notice, we've all been commanded to love one another. But isn't it even more true that we have all been invited to love one another. The greatest thing we can do is allow ourselves to be wrapped up in the love of Jesus Christ, surrounded by and surrendered to this one whose goodness and grace will fill every fiber of our being. The greatest thing we can do is receive his love with joy and gratitude. When that happens it becomes more than a warning or a notice or a commandment. It becomes an invitation to live life to the fullest. It becomes an invitation to live the abundant life.

Jesus said, "My little children...I give you a new command. Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another."