

Love One Another

*Sermon preached by the Rev. Edward M. Sunderland, LCSW,
Associate Rector for Community Ministry,
at the six o'clock evening service, April 5, 2012.
Maundy Thursday.
Based on John 13:1-17, 31b-35.*

Today we remember the Last Supper, the first Eucharist, the foot washing; but most importantly we celebrate the new commandment, the commandment to love one another. This commandment that we love one another is so familiar to Christians that we forget how strange it sounds to many 21st century people. As the heirs of literature that exalts romantic love, and psychoanalysis that describes, diagnoses and seeks to cure impediments to loving relationships, we forget that the idea of important relationships based on attraction and interpersonal psychic chemistry is a relatively recent development in human evolution.

Historically, the protection of property, nurture of the young, and care of the elderly provided by the family were considered too important to be determined by the vagaries of attraction and interpersonal psychic chemistry. For the most part our ancestors relied on the wisdom of family matriarchs and patriarchs, religious leaders, and even tribal elders to determine which matches were best for the tribe and the family.

Romance literature has taught us to think of love as a feeling. We talk about falling in love as if it were a random or accidental occurrence involving good fortune. We work to increase the odds, even using Internet dating services and mobile phone apps to meet a wider variety of people.

Freud and his successors have created entire disciplines that describe and seek to cure the difficulties human beings have in establishing or maintaining loving relationships. These descriptions usually revolve around issues that arise in infancy or childhood and that determine our ability to love and be loved.

As heirs of this romantic description of love, with our trust in the power of psychotherapy to heal us, we moderns have embraced the notion of loving whom we will as a human right. Freeing ourselves from the strictures of family, history and law, we don't want anyone to tell us whom we may and may not love.

And yet Jesus commands us to love one another.

What if I am not attracted to my fellow disciples? Jesus doesn't seem to have taken the idea of attraction into account. What if they don't love me? Jesus never talked about reciprocity. What if they don't love others; surely there must be some type of exclusion clause for haters? Jesus did not really talk about exclusion clauses. This is a very old-fashioned idea of love.

In a recent article in the *New York Times*, "The Brain on Love," Diane Akerman reports on the field of interpersonal neurobiology and its use of brain imaging to describe the way that love determines who we are. Psychoanalytic thought taught us that our attachments to our mothers are determinative in the ways we live our lives. Interpersonal neurobiology uses brain-imaging studies to show how the synchronicity develops: charting the development of attachment "between the brains of mother and child" and watching as the neural pathways that shape patterns of "behavior, thought, and self regard" themselves take shape. These same studies also show that "the brain is constantly rewiring itself based on the experiences of daily life. In the end, what we pay the most attention to is what defines us. How you choose to spend the irreplaceable hours of your life literally transforms you." This understanding shows that love is not a feeling but a series of experiences and actions that shape and re-shape our brains.

Daniel Siegel and Allan Schore, interpersonal neurobiologists at UCLA, have observed, "It's not that care giving changes the genes; loving relationships influence how the genes express themselves." And this expression has consequences. Dr. Siegel cites "scientific

studies of longevity, medical and mental health, happiness and even wisdom that point to supportive relationships as the most robust predictor of these positive attributes in our lives across the life span."

And so the commandment to love one another is not a commandment to feel a certain way, but to carry out the very acts of love in community. The Christian community at its best is a community that includes people who I am not attracted to, people who don't love me, and, yes, even people who exclude others. And we are commanded to love them.

At the beginning of Lent we remembered that at his Baptism, Jesus was reminded of God's love. Before beginning his ministry, before he did anything, he was God's beloved son. Throughout Lent we have had the opportunity to reflect on the ways we have been loved and the ways in which we have fallen short of God's love. None of us has been loved as completely and maturely as we would like to be loved, and none of us has loved as completely and maturely as we would like to have loved. Yet all of us are loved. Now we are commanded to love one another and to care for the world. That love will transform us—and it will transform the world. Yes, that is very old-fashioned. But it is also so 21st century as well.

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