

How Do We Love One Another?

Friends, long-time and new, let's begin this time of reflection with prayer. God of all, you indwell and abide with all of your creation – including each unique person here. Be with us as we wonder: how do we love one another? It is in the spirit of Jesus the Christ we pray. Amen.

Beloved people, I invite you to wonder with me this morning: how do we love one another?

“Insanity is doing the same thing, over and over again, but expecting different results.” The word ‘insane’ is rooted in the Latin words *in-* (not) and *sanus* (healthy). Insane means not healthy. Often misattributed to Albert Einstein, it was actually civil rights advocate and feminist author Rita Mae Brown who first wrote in 1983 (through the voice of a fictional character), *“Insanity is doing the same thing, over and over again, but expecting different results.”*

What, you might wonder, does this have to do with loving one another? Well, do you resonate with the oft-used phrase ‘creature of habit?’ Each of us has typical, habitual ways of behaving in various circumstances – including moments in which we express or receive love and care among family, friends, fellow church members, and even strangers. I have come to experience in my own life and to observe in the lives of others when invited in – that we can become quite stuck in behavioral ruts around the tender phenomena of love and care.

While we may not expect different results, we often wish or long for different results while behaving in the same way over and over again. Such an unsupported wish or longing in a relationship seems about as insane (unhealthy) as unsupported expectations.

I invite us to take a moment to try to see more clearly one of our own habitual (perhaps stuck) behavior in our own journey toward more fully loving ourself and others. So I invite you to close your eyes now if you are comfortable doing so. We'll have them closed for a couple minutes here. How would you complete this first prompt in relation to love of yourself?

I know I should be kinder to myself – or – I know I should take better care of myself, but I've gotten used to doing this... Again: I know I should be kinder to myself – or – I know I should take better care of myself, but I've gotten used to doing this...

With your eyes still closed, welcome the Holy Spirit nudging you to acknowledge this stuck place and to trust that Love will keep working in you toward fuller love of yourself.

Please continue in this quiet posture as I offer another prompt. How would you complete this thought in relation to love between you and another (some particular person)?

Because I love them and I know they love me, I will probably continue to put up with (grin and bear it) when they... Because I love them and I know they love me, I will probably continue to put up with (grin and bear it) when they...

With your eyes still closed, welcome the Holy Spirit nudging you to acknowledge this stuck place and to trust that Love will open a door and embolden you to cross the threshold into braver truth-sharing with that person so that you might develop a stronger, more loving relationship. You're welcome to open your eyes again. I have faith and confidence that we can all move out of some of our stuck spots.

As I meditated on our scripture readings for today, I found both encouragement and warning bells in the epistle of First John. I found that that story from Acts may be a new favorite story for me as it relates to bravery in loving one another.

I feel compelled to be speaking plainly about Christian exceptionalism. If you'd like, please help me out with a nod or shake of your head (however vigorous or discreet) to tell me whether or not you're familiar with the concept of Christian exceptionalism. A mix – that's good fodder. Thank you for your honesty!

Leora Batnitzky, a professor of religion at Princeton University, in an article entitled "Rethinking Christian and Jewish Exceptionalism" explained Christian exceptionalism in this way: "*Christian exceptionalism demands that all peoples follow its singular vision of redemption through Christ.*" I'll read that again. "*Christian exceptionalism demands that all peoples follow its singular vision of redemption through Christ.*"

And in a 2014 article entitled "Keeping Jesus, Letting Go of Christian Exceptionalism," Baptist minister Chuck Queen gets at the effects of Christian exceptionalism with this statement: "*The degree to which Christianity will contribute to a more equitable and just world will depend largely, I believe, upon the degree to which Christians can let go of their exclusive claims on God and deepen their actual commitment to the way of Jesus.*" Chuck Queen further shares the following about Christian exceptionalism: "*Harvard religion professor Diana Eck was once asked by an elderly friend in India: "Do you really believe that God came only once, so very long ago and only to one people?" Professor Eck said, "This very idea that God could be so stingy as to show up only once, to one people, in one part of the world, exploded my understanding of incarnation."*

I encourage you to learn more about how Christian exceptionalism is also a bedrock for White Christian Nationalism in our country and all the intersections that are at play.

Over the centuries, biblical interpretation (that is, the ideas people have derived from their readings of scripture) have sometimes fueled Christian exceptionalism. So I would like to review a couple of these verses from First John. We heard: *“Love, then, consists in this: not that we have loved God, but God has loved us and has sent the Only Begotten to be an offering for our sins.”* This verse has to do with substitutionary atonement, where Jesus dying (for a really, really planned out reason that God had) is that only way that people have access to the salvation of the Love of God. It has been used as a weapon in that way.

A later verse in the passage articulates something similar: *“We have seen for ourselves and can testify that God has sent the Only Begotten as Savior of the world. When any acknowledge that Jesus is the Only Begotten, God dwells in them and they in God.”* Of course, we can see how our own acknowledgement does perpetuate and strengthen the dwelling of God within us – because we find in Jesus an example to follow. But this text has also been construed to make that the only example to follow.

On this New Member Sunday, we have such an opportunity through the reminders of the many roots we have (diverse Christian communities and other sources that have influenced our journeys). And we carry with us wounds from times when individual humans and institutions have walled ourselves off in the security of our surety. And we have also carried gifts from the various traditions and our journeys through them and our deepenings in faith.

On from Christian exceptionalism, First John also offers us deep encouragement when we know that this is the story that we are following: *“Beloved, if God has loved us so, we must have the same love for one another. No one has ever seen God. Yet if we love one another, God dwells in us, and God’s love is brought to perfection in us. The way we know that we remain in God and God in us is that we have been given the Spirit.”*

I encourage you and myself to find ways and moments to pause and feel God dwelling in you and among all of us. The author continues this charge in a later verse: *“We love because God first loved us. If you say you love God but hate your sister or brother, you are a liar. For you cannot love God, whom you have not seen, if you hate your neighbor, whom you have seen. If we love God, we should love our sisters and brothers as well; we have this commandment from God.”* I encourage us to incorporate into our own daily person prayers a plea that God would help us obey this commandment – to love one another.

Let us spend a moment with this story from Acts, which I shared is now a bit of a new favorite for me in emboldening us in living out our faith. We heard, *“An angel of God spoke to Philip and said, ‘Be ready to set out at noon along the road that goes to Gaza, the desert road.’ So Philip began his journey.”*

What?! Philip did not know where the journey was leading. He just felt the prompt to be ready and was – to start out boldly. Are we ready? Are we in postures of readiness?

“The Spirit said to Philip, ‘Go up and meet that carriage.’ When Philip ran up, he heard the eunuch reading Isaiah the prophet and asked, ‘Do you understand what you are reading?’

‘How can I,’ the eunuch replied, unless someone explains it to me?’ With that, he invited Philip to get in the carriage with him.”

What?! These were people from very different cultures. They were on totally different journeys. They paused and saw one another. And the linchpin was the invitation. It would have been very easy to respectfully, kindly, neighborly just move past one another. But there was an invitation to go deeper together.

And finally, we heard, “Further along the road they came to some water, and the eunuch said, ‘Look, there is some water right there. Is there anything to keep me from being baptized?’ He ordered the carriage to stop; then Philip and the eunuch both went down into the water, and Philip baptized him.”

What?! We know from our many Christian affiliations and journeys that the waters of Baptism are so refreshing, reminding us of our belovedness from eternity (from before and beyond our scope of time). So we have our baptismal font always present, always ready with water at the back of our Sanctuary. I invite you to consider that you have nothing stopping you from reaffirming your baptism today.

In a continuing education program of which I’m part with other young clergy, one of our mantras is ‘Harvest the yes!’ Celebrate the yes – the good moments. That moment of decision to baptize was a harvesting of the yes. Today, our New Member Sunday is a harvesting of the yes. Life is short and hard and love is such rigorous work. But we can celebrate the good moments amidst the rigor and difficulty.

If insanity is doing the same thing over and over again expecting different results, let us open-mindedly, openheartedly like Philip and like the court official move toward sanity (health) in our efforts to love ourselves and one another. Indwelling, abiding Love is counting on us. Amen.

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St. Croix United Church (Bayport, MN)
April 28, 2024 (5th Sunday of Easter)
1 John 4:7-21, Acts 8:26-40