

## “AS I HAVE LOVED YOU”

John 15

Love—it is a word that has been used in so many ways. This time of the year a lot of young people will say, “I love you”, as they share wedding vows. But people also say, “I love ice cream,” or “I love the spring weather,” or “I love that song.” What they really mean is that they love what they can get from those things. Those are all different ways of saying, “I love me.”

1 John is the epistle of love. John says very clearly to us, “God is love. Whoever lives in love lives in God, and God in Him. In this way love is made complete among us so that we will have confidence on the day of judgment, because in this world we are like Him.” So God is love and wants us to love. But how is that different than loving ice cream, puppy dogs, or a fiancée?

I’d like to turn to a specific scene in the Bible. It’s from Acts 17. St. Paul is in Athens, speaking on the Areopagus (that would be like in front of the “Hub” at Iowa State University). He works hard to invoke his audience by referring to a statue to an unknown god they have there. He quotes their own poets to show they had a belief in a Supreme Being who made the world and gave it life. He has them in his pocket, until he mentions Jesus rising from the dead. At that point the learned people of Athens are turned off. Why?

To those Greeks why would anyone want to have their bodies resurrected? From what we know of Paul, he isn’t a particularly attractive man. Why would he want that body back? Didn’t Plato the great Greek philosopher say that it would be better to get rid of the body and be free? To them it would be like a butterfly wanting to return to a cocoon.

That kind of thinking still goes on today. The “Da Vinci Code” speaks of certain “secret” Gospels. They were books of the Gnostics, people who thought that the physical was evil and that death would free them to a higher level away from our bodies. And so we have people today trying mystical religions, collecting “sacred stones,” taking great interest in spirituality. Why? Because they believe it will lead them to a better life away from this physical world.

What does love have to do with all of that? If I say I believe in God so that when I die I go to heaven, then I’m thinking of me. What does it matter then if I have a body or not? I could be like the angels singing on the clouds.

But love says something else about going to heaven, why we believe in heaven, why our bodies are important, and why love is so important now. John says, “We love because God first loved us.” To understand love, we have to first see the One who loves us—God.

If I were to hand you two boxes, one that has a bell in it, how could you tell which one has the bell without opening it? You wouldn’t be able to see it, but you could hear the one with the bell by shaking it.

We can’t see love, but we can see what it does. We don’t see God, but we see what He has done. First, He made this world. Then we see what He has done in Jesus. We look to the cross and see the extent of that love.

That same Jesus calls on us to love, but He doesn’t just simply command us to love. He said, “Love one another as I have loved you.” “As I have loved you”—that is what makes for real love in us. Jesus is the “bell” in our box that enables us to love.

In the “Crossways” series the symbol used for God is a circle with arrows pointing in four directions from it. The circle represents how God is eternal. He has no beginning and no end. The arrows show Him always reaching out in love. In the Bible love is not a noun, but a verb. A noun is a way of identifying something like a chair or car or house. A verb is an action. God’s love isn’t a thing or a feeling. It is God in action. God doesn’t just say, “I love you” to us. He loves us. He made us even though He knew we’d be a problem. He didn’t give up on us, but sent His Son to our world to die for us. And He does it all without needing anything in return from us.

That’s why it is so important that God came to us as a human in Christ Jesus. If God was always

a human like us, then He would be coming to those who are a part of Him. Or if we were all just part of the great everything (the Force” in the “Star Wars” movies), then everything is God and what difference did it make that Jesus died for us on the cross? Love is sacrifice for someone else, something outside of us, for someone who can give us nothing in return.

That’s what love now means for us. John says, “We love because God first loved us.” Love then is not a feeling, something that we need to satisfy for ourselves, but it is an action. It is doing as God in Jesus did. It is reaching out to others.

700 years ago an Italian poet named Dante wrote a great poem about a trip from hell to heaven called The Divine Comedy. In hell he sees a man named Ciaccio (which means “hog” in Italian). Ciaccio lived in gluttony on earth, but now is stuck in a cold slush. He does manage briefly to talk to Dante, then returns to the slush. Dante begins to wonder, “When the resurrection takes place, will the fate of those in hell be the same, better, or worse when the bodies reunite with their souls?” He is reminded of Aristotle who said, “When a thing at last is whole, it feels more pleasure, so it feels more pain.” Dante concludes that when the bodies and souls reunite in hell their suffering will be perfected. At the resurrection the damned will be more “perfect”, more perfectly damned and cut off from God.

But in heaven souls await when they are rejoined with their resurrected bodies so they can be restored to love and communion. Aristotle said that man is made for conversion and fellowship. When God created man He said, “It is not good for man to be alone.” So what good are our bodies? Why do we cherish it so? Dante’s conclusion is that our bodies are for other people. The body is for love. Our unions are mediated through the body.

God’s Son took on a body so that He could be like us. God made us with bodies so we can be like Christ and be His body. Our bodies will be resurrected so that we can be the communion of saints. We know in our bodies here on earth that we are the body of Christ, the Church. So for Dante it was vital that our bodies be raised, not for “me,” but for one another. In the body we act, we love as Jesus loves us.

We have heard the story about the difference between heaven and hell. In hell the people are set before a huge feast table with all kinds of sumptuous food. But they are not able to eat any of it because the knives, forks, and spoons have handles so long that they can’t get the food to their mouth. They are starving and in misery. In heaven the people are set before an identical feast table with the same kinds of eating utensils. But they are laughing and enjoying the meal because instead of trying to put the food in their own individual mouths they are reaching across the table to feed someone else.

Love—that is why God made us with bodies, redeemed us in a body, makes us His body, and will raise our bodies. Eternal life is not about me existing forever without pain and suffering. It is about sharing the love God has given us in the body of Christ Jesus. We can love because he first loved us.

Sermon delivered by Pastor Mark T. Heilman  
May 6, 2018  
Memorial Lutheran Church and Student Center  
Ames, Iowa 50014