

“Foolish Talk”

I Corinthians 13:1-3; John 15:9-13

Highlands Presbyterian Church, Columbus

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Love is such a cheap word today. It's often twisted and turned and manipulated until its original meaning is almost no longer apparent. Case in point: a recent ad in a magazine shows a contented man in front of a bowl of spaghetti. The caption reads, "Pasta. Now that's something you can really love!"

Well, I would contend that you can **like** noodles, but I wouldn't characterize it as a long-term mutual relationship. Love is a word that should be reserved for what's rightly intended. It is descriptive of an emotional state or a deep devotion or a high degree of caring. This word should be saved for the times when it really is appropriate to use.

Sometimes we can feel love, even when it may be hard to express. There's a story about an old Vermont farmer. Picture an elderly man perched in a rocking chair next to an equally aged woman. They sit there on the front porch, rocking back and forth, back and forth, without a word being exchanged. Finally he breaks the silence and says, "Do you know, Sarah, you mean so much to me that it's almost more than I can stand **not** to tell you."

Well, I think it's hard for most of us to tell someone that we love them. We're awfully inhibited when it comes to this. We don't want to be misunderstood. We surely don't want to be laughed at. And what happens if it's not reciprocated? We fear to be embarrassed and we certainly don't want to play the fool.

It's hard to say the words "I love you" to another. A family therapist decided to do a little survey among her adult clients. She asked them to tell her who got the most strokes in their families. She defined "strokes" as any form of recognition such as physical touch, a look, a word, a smile or simply a gesture that conveys "I know you're there."

Less than one-fourth said their spouse received the most strokes from them. About the same number indicated it was their children. More than half of them admitted that most of their strokes | went to a pet. Maybe that's why they were in family therapy or maybe they aren't that different from most people when it comes to this.

Jesus talks about love in our scripture today from John. He says, "I love you just as the Father loves me. I have told you this so that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete. My commandment is this: love one another, just as I love you."

And he also went on to say, "The greatest love you can have for your friends is to give your life for them. You did not choose me; I chose you and appointed you to go and bear much fruit, the kind of fruit that endures. Love one another."

Jesus was not shy to speak about love. And even more than saying it, Jesus encourages us to practice it | in the way of his example. The writer of the letter I John echoes this as well. "God showed his love for us by sending his only son into the world, so that we might have life

through him. Friends, if this is how God loves, then we should love one another. No one has ever seen God, but if we love one another, God lives in union with us, and his love is made perfect within us."

Paul, in that familiar passage in I Corinthians, underscores the importance of love when he writes, "I may be able to speak the languages of humans and even of angels, but if I have no love, my speech is no more than a noisy gong or a clanging bell."

The point the scriptures make is that love is not a "take it or leave it" matter. It isn't something incidental to our faith or an elective that we may choose if we so desire. The basic test of our devotion is not how doctrinally correct we are or whether we attend services every Sunday; rather, it is more directly bound up with whether we emulate God, whose very nature is one of love for us. We are loved and, in return, we are to love others. It couldn't be clearer.

What does a person look like when he or she lives in love? Look at a mother with a baby in her arms. Her face and her gentle touch will make it obvious. Love that is genuine and expressive doesn't have to be proven; it is evident to even the most calloused heart. Maternal love doesn't need words because everything conveys it.

What applies to individual Christians also applies to believers in community. What does a congregation look like when it lives by love?

Well it isn't one where some of its members are ignored or shut out. It isn't one that treats strangers as interlopers in a closed group. It isn't one that forgets those who have special needs and who are suffering. It isn't a place of somber faces and blank stares and judgmental looks. It isn't a gathering which neglects its children or fails to provide a nurturing environment to grow in. It isn't one where the world beyond the church doors is seen as unimportant and irrelevant.

Love that is not communicated misses its purpose. Love that cannot be shared is a feeling that starts and stops within the same person. Understand, Jesus' words don't call us to romantic love with all those around us, but to a caring, self-giving love which shows itself clearly. When love is at the center of our lives—love for God and love for people—then all the other aspects of discipleship will eventually fall into line. It is the key which unlocks the door of all other possibilities.

In the midst of the desegregation struggles of the 1960's white parents of a second grader sent her off for the first day at a newly integrated school. They had done their best to teach her respect for all people but, in their Southern community, there was a great deal of antagonism and defiance.

When classes were over for the day, the concerned mother met her daughter at the school door. "How did everything go, honey? she asked anxiously.

"Oh, mother! You know what? A little Negro girl sat next to me."

Afraid that this might have been a traumatic experience for her child, the mother asked cautiously, "And what happened?"

"We were both so scared," the little girl said said, "that we held hands all day long and became friends."

The loneliness between one person and another, even when in close proximity, can seem sometimes like an insurmountable distance. A few feet can seem like a thousand miles. But what fills that gap is something we can give.

"Love one another," teaches Jesus, "love, just as I love you. I tell you this so that my joy can be in you and that your joy may be complete. Remain united to me."

To the world as a whole that may seem like foolish talk, to be followed by even more foolish actions, but let others chide. We who follow Christ know the truth of his words and the living example he provides.

So let's be willing to hold hands with all of humanity and, who knows, we may end up becoming friends with even the most different from us. If others scoff at you, just tell them "It's a Jesus thing" and then let your actions serve as your witness.