

May 17, 2009

John 15:9-17

I Love You

Christians are "commanded" to build grace-based communities of joy, forgiveness and love.

The ability of Madison Avenue to make the profound seem trivial while transforming the trivial into the profound is wondrous.

Of course, that really is the whole goal of advertising -- to make whatever you are selling, no matter how trivial, appear at that moment to be the most important consideration consumers are facing.

One of my favorite new commercials is pitching an age old product. If you watch TV you have probably seen it.

A group of women (girlfriends) are getting a tour of one friend's new house. The special moment comes when the new home owner brings her girlfriends into a large walk in closet lined with beautiful women's shoes.

The ladies all begin to scream and shake uncontrollably. They are filled with joy and happiness over this new walk-in shoe closet.

The camera then cuts to the men. The husband is also giving his friends a tour of the new house. The guy's special moment comes when the husband takes the guys into a walk-in refrigerator lined with their favorite beer.

The guys all begin to scream and shake uncontrollably just like the women did. They are filled with joy and happiness over this new walk-in beer cooler.

Love as a way to get unlimited beer -- that is the Madison Avenue pitch. While it seems over the top, this ad campaign has obviously struck a funny bone with the public.

Beer advertising has always gone hand in hand with sports.

Okay, this ad campaign suggests, Men like women can express 'real' love and emotion to their friends . . . if it will also get them something they really want. Like unlimited beer.

Have you ever noticed how often the media's depiction of churchgoing, Christians, isn't much different?

Christian conservatives and fundamentalist show both anger and emotion over others only when it suits their agenda.

For the most part, TV images of a religious person are rarely of someone declaring with great sincerity, "I love you!"

Unfortunately, the most prevalent image of Christians in the news is of a narrow-minded, self-righteous soul proclaiming, "I judge you!" or "I condemn you!"

How tragically different is that vision from the view presented by Jesus in today's gospel text. Caught up in itemizing our brother's faults or our sister's sins, the church has become best known as a "toe-the-line" community. Instead of being defined by love, we have become defined by law.

The greatest decision facing the 21st-century church is whether it will function as a law-based community of faith or as a grace-based community of love.

Will we be defined by some carefully articulated, theologically sophisticated, Dogma of Faith?" Or will Franklin Church welcome its role as a living, breathing, healing, helping organism known for its "Acts of Love?"

The fact is: If we are genuinely to be a church; if we are to be a true Christian community, we have no choice in this matter.

Jesus did not command us to live a life of faith defined by legalistic particulars. Jesus offered us only one great commandment -- "Love one another as I have loved you."

Instead of a series of laws, Jesus declared we are to live according to the mandate of love.

This means we "get off easy" and we get to live the most demanding life that can be imagined. Law-based faithfulness can be "finessed" in a number of ways.

Fitting the actual experiences of life into the code of a written law always calls for interpretation and extrapolation. At times it seems the only reason we erect laws is so that we have something we can "go around." (Codes of civil conduct).

But the mandate of love is fluid, never set in stone, and is always applicable to every situation. A grace-based community of love is eternally on the spot. We are called to be there, to come through, to care deeply, no matter who or what the circumstances.

In our law-based, secular society, we are outraged when the legal barriers we have so carefully constructed are thrown down by human sinfulness -- through greed, evil, decay.

We are righteously indignant that our laws, our safeguards, have been so callously disregarded. A law-based community's reaction to the failure of its laws is to grow angry, defensive, frustrated and vengeful.

Franklin Church cannot count itself as one with these legislatively directed reactions. We must act differently because our church is grace-based. Our community exists solely as a result of Christ's loving sacrifice for our sake and for our salvation.

As disciples of Christ, we know that all Jesus required of his followers was one thing, and that one thing was everything -- that they love one another.

When any of us falls short of that goal, as each and every one of us will time and time again, the only appropriate reaction on the part of our church is not judgment, not condemnation, but tears.

"Life Lines" is a CD by Peter, Paul and Mary (yes, they're still around).

Today, the three of them have gone down separate paths, but Paul Stookey is an evangelical Christian. (Remember he once lived next door in Birmingham, Mi and attended Michigan State University).

His song on this album, "For the Love of It All," is a masterpiece.

Joined in the lead vocals by Susan Werner, he sings:

"Long ago on a hilltop where now the curious crawl/A man on a cross paid the ultimate cost/For the Love of it all./For the Love of it all/We are gathered by grace/ ... It is still not too late to come celebrate/The Love of it all".

When Franklin Church visits at St. Timothy's Church in Detroit we share in a similar "Greet One Another in Christian Love." Here at Franklin our greeting at times becomes stiff and formal.

At St. Timothy people exchanging the peace with one another saying: "I love you" and/or "I love you, sister" and "I love you, brother" followed by either, "the words, "God loves you, brother. God loves you, sister."

Our folks always love it because we know they mean it!

So from now on let us hug and greet one another with the love of Christ, let us go out into this world and hug it with these words: "I love you, world. God loves you, world . . . with "The Love of It All."

Amen!



Prayer

How easy it is for us to dispense a legalistic, judgmental mentality unaware. O God, forgive us for doing that which we so avidly deplore. Come, Holy Spirit, remake our hearts. Soften them with agape love that burns for all in need. As friends of Jesus, we must heed his loving command. Only then, clothed in proper spiritual attire, may we reflect his love to all who come our way. Amen.