

# Love Story

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**John Wilkinson**  
**Third Presbyterian Church**  
**May 10, 2015**  
**John 15:9-17**

Allow me to share in advance a word of gratitude to Peter DuBois, to the Chancel Choir and to Joyce and Elmer Dustman for the anthem we will hear following. I am touched and honored and very, very thankful.

*Let us pray. We thank you this day, O God, for your good gifts. On this Mother's Day, we thank you for mothers and grandmothers and mother figures who have loved us along the way. We remember those no longer with us, and memories that are cherished and blessed. We think of those for whom this day is not always positive, those whose memories are not always filled with joy and those who have sought motherhood unsuccessfully. Comfort them.*

*We lift up the eight young people who join this congregation today, who bring such gifts and faithfulness to our life together. Bless them this day, and bless them as their journey unfolds in every moment to follow.*

*We ask you to silence in us any voice but your own, and transform us as we hear your word, a word filled with hope and joy and justice and love. For we pray in Christ's name. Amen.*

Today's gospel lesson, from the Gospel of John, is a continuation of the long section in chapter 15 that we began last week. It is of a piece. Jesus calls us to abide in him, that we are a branch of the vine that he is. When we do so, when we abide in him, we will be strong and secure, and more so, we will bear fruit in the world. We can do nothing without God. With God, we can do anything. We become followers of Jesus, disciples, and we glorify God by bearing fruit in the world. We can envision what that looks like – acts of compassion, acts of hope, on scales large and small.

We then continue today because as compelling as this vision is, as meaningful as it is to be a branch in this vine, as needed as our acts of faith are in the world, Jesus knows it will not be easy. He knows the challenges of discipleship, how the world is not always receptive to this vision or message.

I was watching for a brief moment the other day one of those half hour infomercials for a Time-Life series of CD's, from the 1960's. Those commercials always suck me in. I will never likely purchase an eight CD set of what truly may be "timeless classics," but spending a few minutes being sold on that proposition is like a window into my childhood and youth, depending on the era.

You may remember the song: "What the world needs now is love, sweet love; it's the only thing that there's just too little of. What the world needs now is love, sweet love. No, not just for some, but for everyone." I am not sure the song is a "timeless classic," but the sentiment is. When that song was

playing on the radio, the news spoke of Vietnam, of a civil right movement, or an equal rights movement, or a war on poverty. War. Racism. Poverty. Inequality. The world *did* need love. It does now.

It is not enough to sing about it, nor is it enough to sentimentalize it. True love of neighbor will demand justice, whether in Baltimore, Maryland or Rochester, New York. True love of neighbor will seek equality, equal access, equal standards for all relationships and all identities. True love of neighbor will insist that division based on race or income level mars the gospel that claims us; these divisions do not bear fruit, and therefore they must be resisted and transformed.

Jesus understands how difficult this all is, on scales large and small. The world rejects love, and there are times as well when love is difficult to give, and receive, in our own relationships. So he continually inspires us, motivates us, nurtures and cultivates us. We do all of this, he says, to pursue joy, a deep sense of peace and hope that persists in love, even when love is unwelcome.

Then Jesus makes it even clearer. Love one another, we are commanded. Love one another. And lest we make it sweet or sappy or sentimental, he equates this love with sacrifice, self-sacrifice, laying down one's life for friends. When we do that, we are friends of Jesus. Friends, of one another, and friends, of Jesus.

When asked what we believe, here is the best answer. Love. We believe in love. It is our ethical framework. It is our organizing principle. It is our doctrine. It is our ministry. Love.

Two images of what that love might look like.

I joined the church on Mother's Day. We did it in eighth grade. We met every Thursday afternoon from 4:00 to 6:00 p.m. *That* was fun. We wrote papers and memorized long paragraphs – all the things that made church really appealing to a fourteen year old kid. Toward the end of the process, my father was in a horrible car accident, about which I have spoken. He was hospitalized for a long time, and came home just the week before this week, and was not well enough to get to church on the day I joined.

And all throughout that time, the church did what it does the best, never fully, never completely, then or now, but with intention. It did what it does best. It loved me. It prayed for my family, for me, for my dad. It got me to places when my mom was off in another part of the state tending to my dad. It picked me up and cared for me. It loved me, and when it is at its best, or close to it, that's what it does. It loves. Awkward eighth graders. People without homes. People deemed beyond the circle because of who they love or how they appear. The least, the lost, the lonely, definitions that embody a thousand different faces. The grieving. It loves, a community of friends, friends of Jesus and friends of one another.

We were sledding one time, in a park next to our grandparents' home. Not a huge hill, but big enough. And my brother got off course. He was headed toward a tree, a big tree, and my mom could see what was about to happen. She rushed over and put herself in between my brother and his sled and that tree. Her leg was bruised and bleeding and stayed that way for a very long time.

And what is true for that moment would have been true another million times if needed, and would be true for all those mothers and mother figures in your life. Getting in between you and hard places,

taking the brunt of the blow. It is called love. It is what we do, at our best, and when we are less than our best it is that love to which we aspire. It is not sweet or sappy or sentimental, because it can leave us bruised and bleeding, inside or out. It is what we do. We love, even imperfectly and incompletely. We love.

Florence Allshorn writes that "...I know that life is clean, dirty, ugly, beautiful, wonderful, sordid – and above all love. I used to think that being nice to people and feeling nice was loving people. But it isn't. It isn't. Love is the most unselfishness and it's so big I've never touched it."

We remain in Eastertide, the season when we remember that love came down and died for us, the season when we remember that love is stronger than death. It is our story, and the story of our faith. The world needs it. Now. And we do, too. Now. And the good news is that it is given to us as a gift, and we simply receive it, and open it, and enjoy it, and pass it on. In the name of our friend Jesus, and in the power of his love. Amen.