

## “Just As I Have Loved You” (John 13:35) Easter 5, May 2, 2010

Most of what we learn in life we learn from observation. So it's not surprising that when children were asked to describe love, they gave examples like these:

- “Love is when my Dad reads me my favorite story for the hundredth time and doesn't skip any pages.”
- "Love is when Mommy sees Daddy all smelly and sweaty and still says he is handsomer than Brad Pitt."
- "When my grandma got arthritis, she couldn't bend over and paint her toenails anymore. So now my grandpa does it for her all the time, even though he's got arthritis, too. That's love."

Interesting examples! But if we really want to know what love is, there is an even better example to learn from, and that is our Lord Jesus Christ. He is the embodiment of love, the most perfect expression of love. And not only can we learn from Jesus' example, He wants us to learn from it – as He says in our text: **“I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another.”**

Now, we all know this, of course. How many sermons have we heard about loving in the spirit of Jesus?! The question is: *What does that actually mean?* These days, there are a lot of opinions on the subject. But do they really fit what we see in the Bible? Not necessarily! Some don't even come close! So here most of all, we want to learn from observation. Jesus said, **“Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another.”** Well, how *has* He loved us? How did He show love during His time here on earth? And how can we imitate that love in our own lives? That's what we're going to reflect on today.

Before we dive in, though, let's quickly cover the basics. Most of us know that the word for love in our text is agape. It's one of four Greek words for love, and it's the only one that can never ask *“What's in it for me?”* Agape love is self-giving love. The focus is always on others and the question is always, *“What's best for others?”* That's not to say there are no benefits for us. There are. Practicing agape love helps us get out of ourselves and overcome selfishness. It helps us mature spiritually and develop a godly character. It helps use our lives in a meaningful way doing things that make a difference. But...that's not why we do it. We do it for others. Agape love is always only about what's best for others. That was Jesus' focus, and He wants that to be our focus: **“Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another.”**

So that said, what are some key qualities of this love? We can't look at all of them, but let's take a look at three.

First of all, when we look at Jesus' example, we see that His kind of love is **active**. Jesus didn't just sit around *feeling* love. He didn't spend His time *philosophizing* about love. Instead, Jesus went about *demonstrating* love. He put

His love into action. And when we think of His love, that's what comes to mind. Jesus healed people, fed people, taught people. Jesus served people, comforted people, defended people. Greatest of all, Jesus died for people – died in our place to save us from our sins! Jesus' love was active love, and that is the model He has in mind for us, too.

We even see this in Jesus' version of the Golden Rule: **“Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.”** Now, every religion has some version of the Golden Rule, but when we compare them to Jesus' version, what stands out is that the others are so passive – they focus on what not to do. Buddha said, *“Do not hurt others in ways that you yourself would find hurtful.”* Confucius said, *“Do not do to others what you would not like yourself.”* Even the version Jesus grew up with was passive: *“What is hateful to you, do not do to others.”* But what did Jesus teach? Active love. **“Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.”** Now, this might not seem like much of a difference, but it's worth keeping in mind that Christian love is not just about what we don't do. It's not just about avoidance or keeping our noses clean. Christian love is active! It means getting our hands dirty to help others. It means putting ourselves on the line to benefit others. It means stepping out of our comfort zone to serve others. Self-giving. That's what Jesus did. That's the example Jesus wants us to follow. **“Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another.”**

Besides being active, Jesus' kind of love has **the strength of its convictions!** That is, it may be patient and kind, but when someone's wellbeing is at stake, it is also open and honest – about values, about priorities, even about sin. And these days, that's is worth keeping mind. To hear some people talk, you'd think Jesus was some new age guru that not only accepted everyone but accepted everything – all in the name of love. Point out that something's a sin and we're likely to hear, *“Jesus would be okay with it. Jesus would understand. Times are different now. And after all, ‘God is love.’”* We're also like to get an earful about “not being narrow-minded,” and “not judging,” because remember “we're all sinners.” Yes, to hear some people talk, Christian love indulges everything and says nothing. It's always “nice,” always “polite.” Indeed, its greatest fear is possibly, perhaps hurting someone's feelings.

And that's supposed be like Jesus? Funny, I don't remember Jesus being silent about sin. I don't remember Jesus pulling His punches. I don't remember Jesus saying what people wanted to hear. Where is that in the Bible? What I remember is Jesus being straightforward with people – and precisely *because* He loved them. He didn't want them thinking their lives were okay when they weren't. He didn't want them going down a path that was self-destructive. He spoke the truth in love, but He *spoke* it, even if it might possibly, perhaps hurt someone's feelings. Remember the young man who went away sorrowful because Jesus zeroed in on his materialism? Or Jesus' words to Martha when she complained about Mary not helping her with dinner? Or the things Jesus said to the scribes and Pharisees when they acted all self-righteousness? Jesus

said what needed to be said – not in spite of loving them but because He loved them. Love is like that. It shows the **strength of its convictions**.

And really, would we want it any other way? This fact came home to me years ago when a couple came in to talk about their wedding. I knew the young man – I had confirmed him – but this was the first time I had met the bride-to-be, and I have to tell you, it was not a pleasant experience! Not only was she rude to me, she was rude to her fiancé – sarcastic, belittling, bullying – and this was before they were married! After they left, I had an awful feeling about this wedding. It should not happen. Oh, I'll be honest. There was a part of me that just wanted to be nice and polite and go along with it. Why rock the boat? Why say anything? It's their life, their decision. On the other hand, though, if I officiated at the wedding that would mean I supported it, and I couldn't wish a marriage like that on anyone! So the more I thought about it, the more I prayed about it, I knew what I had to do. I stopped by the young man's house. I explained to him what I observed, how I felt, and I explained why I could not perform the wedding. It was tough, let me tell you. This was the last thing I wanted to do. And it did not go over well. In particular, I got an earful from the bride-to-be – about how unloving, judgmental, narrow-minded I was, etc. But you know what? About a month later, the wedding was off. And as a matter of fact, the young man thanked me for being honest. It turned out that he, too, had had deep reservations about the relationship, but he was a nice guy, and after going together for so long, he figured they either had to go forward or break up, and he hadn't wanted to hurt her feelings. Well, this gave him the chance to be honest – with himself and with her. Breaking up was a good thing. And just so you know, he did later meet someone else, and I did perform that wedding; and their marriage has proven to be a strong one. In fact, just this last week I got their son's graduation announcement. As I opened it, I thought about what might have been. It was hard, but I am so glad I showed the strength of my convictions!

That's just one example of many I could cite. I'm sure we could all come up with more of our own. There are situations when love compels us to speak up. Of course, we do need to pick the right time and place. We must be calm about it, even humble. We must **“speak the truth in love.”** But when someone's wellbeing is at stake, love has to show the strength of its convictions. That's what Jesus did. That's the example Jesus wants us to follow. **“Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another.”**

Last but not least, Jesus' example shows us that love is **sacrificial**. That is, it doesn't just go into action when it's convenient. It doesn't just show the strength of its convictions when it's popular. Because it focuses on what's best for others, agape love does what needs to be done – even if it costs us.

The outstanding example, of course, is Jesus' sacrifice on the cross. He gave His all for you and me. But you know, sacrifices don't have to be huge to be meaningful. Even little sacrifices can reflect the love of Christ. What matters is

the spirit in which we offer them – giving up something precious to us in order to benefit someone else.

Here's an example. The Simmons family had a motto, "*Love is action.*" Dave Simmons and his wife did their best to teach their kids this value. Well, one day Dave took his 8-year old Helen and 5-year old Brandon to the mall, and when they pulled into the parking lot, there was a big sign that said, "Petting Zoo." Immediately the kids asked, "Can we go, Daddy? Can we go?." Dave said, "Sure," and handed both kids a quarter. Then they headed off to the petting zoo; he headed for Sears. But a few minutes later, as he was making his way down the aisle, he spotted Helen slowly walking up behind him. She said, "Daddy, it cost fifty cents. So, I gave Brandon my quarter." Then with a smile she said, "Love is action, right?!" So what do you think he did? Not what you might guess. After Dave finished his shopping, he took Helen back to the petting zoo. They stood by the fence watching Brandon go crazy petting and feeding the animals. As Helen stood just watching, Dave felt fifty cents almost burning a hole in his pocket, but he never offered it, and she never asked for it. Helen was following through with the lesson. Love is action. And sometimes that means sacrificial action. Love that's real is willing to pay a price.

Now, on this theme, my guess is that if a loved one required a major sacrifice on our part, we would be willing to give it. But often, what's required are little sacrifices. Will we give them, too? Maybe it's time that's required of us – when there are other things we'd rather do. Maybe it's money that's required of us – when there are other things we'd like to spend it on. Maybe it's letting someone else take the credit we deserve. Maybe it's letting a mistake or a hurtful remark just slide. Maybe it's sacrificing pride, or the need to be right, or our expectations of others. These sacrifices can also be expressions of love. Of course, it needs to be done without patting ourselves on the back. How noble I am! How giving! How godly! That would make it about us, not about others. But little sacrifices offered for the sake of others – that, too, is agape love and part of what Jesus asks of us when He says, "**Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another.**"

Jesus has been called "the man for others." He wants our love to be focused on others. He wants it to be active, principled, sacrificial. No, we won't do it perfectly. But as we take this message home with us today, let's ask how we can do it better. There are many opportunities to practice agape love – with our families, our friends, our neighbors, our coworkers, members of our church – and that is what Jesus invites us to do. "**Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another.**" Amen.