

Love in Action

John 15:4,5, 9-11

First Presbyterian Church, Champaign, IL

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John 15:4,5, 9-11 ⁴ Abide in me as I abide in you. Just as the branch cannot bear fruit by itself unless it abides in the vine, neither can you unless you abide in me. ⁵ I am the vine; you are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing. ⁹ As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love. ¹⁰ If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commandments and abide in his love. ¹¹ I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete.

Last week when I preached at Windsor of Savoy, I told the congregation that the sermon I was going to preach was one that they've heard many, many times. (You'll remember, the crux of that sermon was "Love is the answer.")

I asked our friends at the Windsor to do some math with me. I wanted to figure out how many sermons they've heard in their lifetimes. The congregation guessed that the average age in the room was 88, and these folk, on average, had attended worship about 30-times a year for their entire lives; that includes Sunday worship services, weddings, and funerals. I entered these stats into my phone (!) and discerned they had experienced 2,640 sermons, give or take a few hundred. (That's about 748 hours of preaching!)

I told them that a high percentage of those sermons drew the exact same conclusion as the sermon I was about to preach: *Love is the answer*. It seems to me, any preacher is going to come back round and round and round to that theme. It's certainly a focus of Jesus' ministry.

Love is the answer.

We can all pretty easily agree that's true.

We can also easily agree that it's easier to say than to do. And what does it mean, practically, that love is the answer?

We can believe that love is the answer, but, because the world's problems never seem to go away, love may be an impotent answer, or an answer of words only, or a theoretical but impractical answer. Certainly, love is more than the mushy sentiment we find on Hallmark cards, right? I hope so. And I believe so.

Last week I asked, "How is love the answer?" But I didn't answer that question, and I felt a little uneasy about it.

I got one answer immediately after worship.

A friend—and I have permission to share this story, but not his name—told me about an exchange he had with a friend. Conversation somehow got to face masks, Covid, and Trump. He said he was no fan of Trump. She thought Trump had hung the moon. They spared a bit, and then they laughed. They agreed they'd never agree on that. But—and here's the kicker—they still loved each other *anyway*.

Mutual forbearance. That's what that's called. And that is one of the "foundations" of Presbyterian polity. Theologically and constitutionally, we believe that sometimes we must agree to disagree. This is how our PCUSA *Book of Order* puts it:

[W]e . . . believe that there are truths and forms with respect to which ~~men~~ [people] of good characters and principles may differ. And in all these we think it the duty both of private Christians and societies to exercise mutual forbearance toward each other. (From the Synod of New York and Philadelphia, 1788).

My late friend Johnnie Underwood would add this: "And we can disagree without being disagreeable."

This is one way that we put love into action. This is one way love is the answer: We exercise mutual forbearance towards one another.

BUT, loving each other by exercising mutual forbearance is increasingly difficult. “America has a scorn problem,” says By Tish Harrison Warren, an Anglican priest who reflects on matters of faith for the NYTimes.

A Scientific American report on political polarization noted that Americans increasingly hold “a basic abhorrence for their opponents — an ‘othering’ in which a group conceives of its rivals as wholly alien in every way.” It continues, “This toxic form of polarization has fundamentally altered political discourse, public civility and even the way politicians govern.” A 2019 study by Pew said, “55 percent of Republicans say Democrats are ‘more immoral’ when compared with other Americans; 47 percent of Democrats say the same about Republicans.”

We find one another repugnant — not just wrong but bad. Our rhetoric casts the arguments of others as profound moral failings.^[1]

We despise people who don’t think like us. If we cannot be neighbors and have conversations with one another about the day’s hot topics, then we cannot practice democracy.

Mutual forbearance. Being good neighbors. Agreeing to disagree. Growing closer and deeper. This communion leads to answers, to the possibility of friendship, and to a more hopeful tomorrow.

If Jesus is the vine and we are the branches, then we belong together, we live together, we grow together.

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The shootings at (1) a Buffalo, New York, grocery store, (2) downtown Milwaukie, and at (3) Geneva Presbyterian Church in Laguna Hills, California, give us pause to ask: besides exercising mutual forbearance towards one another, how else is love the answer to such violence?

If we don't know how to put that love into gear, we probably aren't thinking very hard. We can do at least these things:

- Support public education.
- Support mental health care in our community.
- Have a conversation with our neighbors about gun violence, about gun control, about gun laws, about the Second Amendment, about community "safety."
- We can talk about race.
- We can deepen our support of DREAAM House.
- We can pray.

Those are some ways we can put the walk into the talk of love. Yes, love is the answer, but we are the agents of God's love in this place. As disciples of Jesus, we are the hands and feet of God's love.

Allow me to return to that list I just shared.

1. Support public education. I pray the Buffalo shooter had great teachers in school, a great system of academic and socio-emotional support. But maybe he didn't. Maybe he was a tough kid and got pushed to the margins. Maybe there wasn't a teacher or a coach or a school nurse who could make the positive difference for him. All education is good, of course. But public education touches most of our kids. Public education must succeed in our county. Tutor kids. Coach soccer. Support local public schools.

2. Support mental health. May is Mental Health Awareness Month. We can help (1) raise awareness about the challenges those living with mental health and addiction issues face. We can (2) work to reduce the stigma many experience. When people have mental health needs, there are fewer affordable places they can go. Support mental health.

3. Have a conversation about gun violence. What's the answer, or answers? Should we ban assault weapons? Why didn't the NY "red-flag law" work? Let's get beyond the heated rhetoric that "Guns don't kill people, people kill people." Let's move on. Let's go deeper. These conversations are important for both our nation *and* our community.

Gun violence, after all, has found its way to Champaign County in a big way.^[2] A Journal of Pediatrics study found that “the number of young people carrying a handgun was 41 percent higher during the years 2015 to 2019, than in the period 2002 to 2006.”^[3] Is this a good thing? Let’s talk about guns.

4. We can talk about race. If you are black, Asian, Jewish, immigrant, transgender, gay, lesbian, or queer you are at a significantly higher risk of being subject to a hate crime perpetrated by a young, white male. What are we doing to stand against hateful rhetoric like “replacement theory”?^[4] All of us need to talk about race, white people especially.

5. We can support our very own DREAAM House. DREAAM seeks to disrupt the school-to-prison pipeline by replacing it with an opportunity pipeline stocked with caring mentors, a great after school program, and summer activities designed to help kids do well academically and to thrive emotionally. We are building a community of support around vulnerable children and youth. On Tuesday evening there was no parking here because Centennial Hall was filled with DREAAMers and families learning about an upcoming basketball program. Good news is happening in DREAAM, and your church supports it.

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If we think that loving the world only means having occasional warm thoughts about others, that’s short-sighted. Love is the answer, and that means we put the pedal to the metal and get going. If we don’t know how to put love into gear, we probably aren’t thinking very hard.

Our hope and help is Jesus. Jesus says abide in me. The branch can’t make it without the vine. The disciple can’t make it without the teacher. Love can’t make it when it is cut off from its source. Abide in me, Jesus says. Walk humbly and closely.

Dare to love the world in the name and manner of Jesus, our Lord. We can do it. We must do it. And with God’s help, we will.

In the name of God the creator, redeemer, and sustainer.

Amen.

Grant unto us, O God, the fullness of your promises. Where we have been weak, grant us your strength; where we have been confused, grant us your guidance; where we have been distraught, grant us your comfort; where we have been dead, grant us your life. Apart from you, O Lord, we are nothing, in and with you we can do all things. Amen. (*from the Church of Canada*).

^[1] *America Has a Scorn Problem*, Rev. Tish Harrison Warren, May 15, 2022, NY Times opinion.
<https://www.nytimes.com/column/tish-harrison-warren>

^[2] Kristi and Bob Rice are our mission partners in South Sudan. Kristi wrote this after the Buffalo shooting and before news of the California shooting broke: "I am grieving and angry to see news of another shooting in the U.S., another hate crime. Ten human beings had their lives cut short. I think that we as average citizens have a significant role to play. We can find ways that we can acknowledge wrongs of the past, work towards healing and freedom, and find ways to protect each other. We can examine ourselves and be willing to give up our sense of innocence, or privilege, or right to own a gun (especially assault rifles!!) in the interest of protecting each other and promoting the wellbeing of all. Lord, have mercy on us.

And she quotes Paul from his letter to the Philippians: "Each of you should look not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others. Your attitude should be same as that of Christ Jesus." Philippians 2:4-5

^[3] Editorial, *The News-Gazette*, Champaign, IL, Wed. May 18, 2022, p. A-4.

^[4] The vast majority of hate crimes are directed against people of color, religious minorities, and LGBTQ people. Among reported hate crimes, racially motivated crime is the most common. Nearly half of race-based hate crimes target [Black people](#). While the number of hate crimes involving religious bias has decreased over the last year, Americans continue to be targeted on the basis of their faith. In 2018, nearly 60% of such crimes targeted Jewish people and Jewish institutions. One in five hate crimes targets LGBTQ people.
<https://everytownresearch.org/issue/hate-crimes/>