

Scripture: John 15:9-17

Sermon Title: "Set Free and Setting Free by Love"

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"This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you." These words from Jesus on the surface seem so simple. But, as we all can attest to from personal experience, if there is one thing that love is not, it's simple. Love can indeed be complex and complicated. Love can be hard - especially when it is not reciprocated or when we show love to a neighbor and it is not graciously received. Love can take on many forms. And when we talk about love in this context which gave way to this command that Jesus shared with his disciples, we are not talking about the romantic type of love, but the love, the connection, the relationship that should and can be found between all people.

Now I mentioned that this love, this connection, this relationship can take many forms and today I want to talk about two variations. The first is love in the midst of a hierarchy. What do I mean by that? I'm talking about love when there is someone who is dependent upon someone else for something. And in this type of relationship there are certain barriers - certain separations, certain things not shared. Think of a parent and child, teacher and student, boss and employee and so on. Where, for a lack of better terms, there is a ranking, of one above and one below. Now, all of these connections, where there is some sort of dependency, can and should have love being lived out within them. Yet, there are distinctions here and rankings, and there are limits, and there are barriers that separate.

So that is one variation of love - love in the midst of hierarchy. Love when there are barriers. The second is love in the midst of friendship in its purest sense. Love in the midst of equality. Where one person is not dependent on the other but there is a beautiful interdependence. There are no barriers, no distinction, no above and below, but an equality founded in mutual care, mutual vulnerability, sharing your deepest selves with one another. This is love in the midst of equality.

Now, between these two variations, connections and relationships can travel from a place of hierarchy to a place of equality. For example, I had one professor in seminary whom we always addressed as Dr. Carey and he addressed us by our first name. This was a barrier. He would not accept Facebook friend requests from student – for he was not going to invite his students into this deeper place of knowing about him. This was a barrier. Now this doesn't mean it didn't show his students great love and care, it just means we were living out love in a place of hierarchy. Now, a couple months after graduation, while visiting the seminary, I ran into him and, as was my instinct, I said, "Hello Dr. Carey!" He said, "Call me Greg." We were moving to a place of equality. And now, we are even friends on Facebook.

Why am I sharing all of this today? In our scripture reading, as Jesus is talking with the disciples we see that their relationship, their love has moved from that place of hierarchy to a place of equality. Jesus said to them, "I do not call you servants any longer... but I have called you friends." Jesus is saying that he no longer claims a place above the disciples as Master, but along side them. Jesus removed the barriers which once separated them, he has shared deep from within himself, and now acknowledged an interdependence claiming them as friend. For this work of ministry which they were called to, this work of love which we all are called to, is one that we do with Jesus, partners in loving the world into wholeness.

You know, in our lives, there are obviously moments when connections and relationships will have and may even need the hierarchy. Still there we ask, how did Jesus love? Even as Master, he did not take advantage of, exploit, or mistreat others. He did not have an ego that needed to be controlled. Rather he was generous with what he had – spending time with those society had deemed lowliest, being kind, sharing and doing it all without expectation. And so when we are in such relationships, we should offer love and grace that mirrors that of Jesus. Yet, I believe that, more often than not, our work is to follow Jesus in removing the barriers which unnecessarily separate, moving toward equality, moving toward pure friendship. Seeing others as neither

better than or less than but equal to us and caring for them as such. And even when this way of loving is met with pushback, is met with challenge, even faces hatred, we continue to love. For that is what Jesus did. Even in the midst of hatred and anger directed toward him, he continued to love. He loved to the cross and beyond.

In just a few moments, we will sing our final hymn – one that is likely familiar to us all in one way or another - The Battle Hymn of the Republic. This is a hymn which, on the surface, through it's music and it's words, is very rousing and encouraging as we seek to follow the truth of God which marches on and it is certainly fitting for this Memorial Day Weekend. However, also within these words is the spirit of love which we hear Jesus talking about today – this spirit of love without barriers. Julia Ward Howe, the author of this hymn's lyric, was well know for her social justice activism during the Civil War and she was a strong opponent to slavery. She was committed to destroying the barrier of slavery, which seperated people as some better than and others less than. One night, in 1861, after touring a union camp, these words which we will be singing came to her, and started touching lives. Year later, during the Civil Rights movement, Martin Luther King Jr. quoted this hymn during his last speech before his assassination, as his mission and his vision for our country – a vision of complete equality, a vision of removed barriers - came together with that of Julia Ward Howe, whose activism helped give birth to these words. And so, as we come to sing these words once again, may we strive to continue the mission of freedom, of equality, of breaking the chains that still bind so many in this life, destroying the barriers that elevate some and push low others. May we commit to the work of love and justice which was penned deep within these words. May our goal forever be to live out the truth of God, as revealed through our Lord and our Friend Jesus Christ. May we follow in the ways of Jesus and love away the divisions, strive for the purest forms of equality, and willingly give our lives over to this call – to this command to love one another. For after all, we have been set free by the love of Jesus. May we continue his work, and through all the ways that we give of ourselves, may we, by love, be setting others free too. So be it and may it be so. Amen.