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A Loving, Beloved Community 5: Loving – 1 Cor. 15:31-32;
Eph1:15-23

What a strange pairing of lessons! That's what I'd be thinking if someone else were preaching and I was sitting where you are. What on earth has Larry got in his head this time? Well, it's love. We have got to love each other.

One thing any community, but especially a Christian community, has to face is how to exist together. And for a Christian community, that has even greater urgency, since we are supposed to love each other as Christ loves us, which is to say, completely. And we're supposed to show that love to the world, so that love is so obvious they can see it, realize how wonderful it is, and want to experience it themselves.

Not the easiest thing to do – particularly in the church! The church in general has a track record, since its earliest days, of attacking each other rather than building one another up, as even the book of Acts records.

So, is this bar just set too high? Is anything like living as a community bound together in love even possible?

Honestly, I'm not sure. But I do know we can try, and so I want to share some practices that ought to help us truly be a loving, beloved community. Remember, we are a beloved community, beloved by God – how we love ought, then, reflect that love as best we can.

So what is this love I'm talking about? Not the love we refer to today with such ease. Love, as I mean love, and as God means us to love, is not some sappy emotion, but an attitude, a quality, most obviously seen in how we act among others. It is loving as God loved us. Yet we struggle, not least because our culture has taken this attitude and made it into a precious, fine feeling that only happens between two people or at most within a family or small group.

Love is more about thinking than feeling, a goal you set yourself to realize rather than a bolt from the blue that changes your whole life in an instant. Like the motto on that trivet I referred to in my sermon last month: "Kissin' don't last; cookin' do." Love, love within the community of the church, the kind of love that the apostle Paul talks about, the most important and fundamental kind of love, Divine love, even - is not an emotion, but an attitude. Kissin' – the romance – is powerful and exciting; but cookin', the day-to-day care, will still be important long after people have settled comfortably into each other's routines. That's *agape* – the Greek word that our Bibles translate as love.

You may really hate someone, avoid them, complain incessantly about them – but you can still love them with this attitude of *agape*. And *agape*, in the hands of Paul and the words of Jesus, *agape* gives us a whole way of relating to the rest of humanity in a Christian way. Jesus may well have spoken Aramaic, but when he said love, it was written in Scripture as *agape*.

How do we make this work in this strange little community we call the church? More importantly, how do we live it out here at Valley Presbyterian Church? Four principles:

1. We treat one another with respect.
2. We respect each other's dignity.
3. We dignify each other by viewing everyone as an individual child of God, no more and no less valuable than we ourselves.
4. We value others. We seek to build up: a. the church; b. each other; c. yourself.

Now, these things all follow under the heading of Robert Fulghum's happy statement, "everything I ever needed to know I learned in Kindergarten." These are simple, common sense rules for living in relationship with other human beings. But for most of us, we've gotten into the habit of believing we know better or that they no longer apply to us or life has just worn us down to the point where we've forgotten them.

What did we learn long ago that we've forgotten? Respect. Giving each other the benefit of the doubt, even when we probably know do better. Listening. Making eye contact. Catching yourself trying to walk away but staying put until the encounter is truly finished, not just until you want to bail out.

Dignity. Many of our minds and bodies don't work the way they once did, and helping someone maintain their sense of belonging, of being a part of those of us who still function fairly well is an art well worth cultivating.

Seeing a child of God inside that nasty, crusty, off-putting exterior. This is really hard, sometimes.

Building up the church: doing what you can to make this beloved community irresistible to the people outside our walls who are starving for God – especially those who don't know it. Being the church that supports each of us in the difficult endeavor of living a Christian life, a life for God. Building others up: complimenting when it's appropriate. Smiling and being pleasant. Pointing out mis-buttoned shirts and crumbs on the chest - gently. Demonstrating by how we interact that we care, or are at least trying.

And then the hard part: really caring.

The church at its birth was meant to be a support system for believers to be energized and recharged to go out and spread the good news about Christ, not a place to house a bunch of crotchety doyens of

righteousness. That's how the early church grew: by living what they taught, and teaching compassion, care and love not just for one another, but for those hurting outside our little group, being agents of healing to a wounded world.

So what about those two strange lessons from Paul that we began by reading?

This: Paul demonstrates what I've been talking about. The first lesson, to the church in Corinth, refers to him "fighting wild beasts at Ephesus." It wasn't lions and tigers and bears Paul was talking about: it was the people of that city, who fought him tooth and nail as he planted a church among them. Clearly, he's told some war stories to the Corinthians about his time in Ephesus, and it wasn't all good. But he's telling the believers in Corinth that the Ephesians' resistance to his message did not in any way influence his belief in and need to preach the resurrection of Christ to them.

Which is why the second passage is so important: here, Paul is writing to the same people he called "wild beasts": with love, care, and joy. "I don't stop giving thanks to God for you when I remember you in my prayers," he says.

There's a piece of paper on the bulletin board in the pastors' hallway, entitled 10 Ways to Love, with Scriptural references. It reads: Listen without interrupting. Speak without accusing. Give without sparing. Pray without ceasing. Answer without arguing. Share without

pretending. Enjoy without complaint. Trust without wavering. Forgive without punishing. Promise without forgetting.

Which ones can you do today?

And from one other of Paul's messages, this time to the church at Thessalonica: "Live in peace with each other. Brothers and sisters, we urge you to warn those who are disorderly. Comfort the discouraged, Help the weak. Be patient with everyone. Make sure no one repays a wrong with a wrong, but always pursue the good for each other and everyone else. Rejoice always. Pray continually. Give thanks in every situation because this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus. ...examine everything carefully and hang on to what is good. Avoid every kind of evil." (1 Thessalonians 5:13-22)

Do this, and we will truly be a loving, beloved community.

Do this, and we will live.