

In the Name of the Living God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

Almost all of us are familiar with the newspaper comic strip, "Peanuts". Listen to this dialogue between Lucy and Charlie Brown:

Lucy: **"You know what I do not understand? I do not understand love!"**

Charlie Brown: **"Who does?"**

Lucy: **"Explain love to me, Charlie Brown."**

Charlie Brown: **"You cannot explain love. I can recommend a book or a poem or a painting, but I cannot explain love."**

Lucy: **"Well....try, Charlie Brown. Try."**

Charlie Brown: **"Well, let's say I see this beautiful, cute little girl walk by."**

Lucy: **"Why does she have to be cute? Huh? Why can't someone fall in love with someone with freckles and a big nose? Explain that!"**

Charlie Brown: **"Well, maybe you are right. Let's just say I see this girl walk by with this great big nose.... "**

Lucy: **"I didn't say GREAT BIG NOSE."**

Charlie Brown: **"Not only can you not explain love — you cannot even talk about it."**

Thank you. Does not that kind of illustrate the problem that we have?

Love is not optional for the followers of Jesus. Jesus says, "I give you a new commandment ...". Not a suggestion. Not a recommendation. A commandment! Not just a command to love like our mother or father, but to love in the same way that Jesus loves us. Jesus said, "As I have loved you, so you must love one another." Notice the little word "must".

Just as there was no getting around the command of our mothers, "You must wash your hands before eating".

Jesus does not say they have to like one another...which is good because, as we all know, some people are simply more likeable than others. That is true in this church, as well as in your family and mine, and it was certainly so in the ranks of his disciples. The John who wrote our fourth gospel was hardly fond of Judas Iscariot, calling him a liar and a thief, leaving us with little doubt that he did not care one bit for the betrayer. And he may not have gotten along with some of the others as well, with the evidence from other stories about their adventures with Jesus to leave us with the idea that the disciples had their share of squabbles.

So, why does Jesus command us to love? It seems virtually impossible. A command from God that sets us up to fail?

Every Sunday, at the beginning of the service, we hear about God, to whom "all hearts are open, all desires known, and from you no secrets are hid." Certainly God knows that there is a part of every one of us that rebels against the idea of pure, unconditional love. Despite the example that we have in the undeserved and unconditional love for us by Jesus, there is a part of us that says such love is out of place in the world in which we live. There is a part of us that says, "Sure, loving others is great...up to a point...."

Is not that what we do all the time?

We draw a line and say, "That's how much we are prepared to love the next person".

We draw a line and say, "That's how far we are prepared to do a kind deed for someone else".

We draw a line and say, "Those are the people we are prepared to love".

We are happy to love in this selective kind of way. We are comfortable with the kind of love that does not make us feel uncomfortable. And, of course, we might be happy with this kind of love, but it is not what Jesus was talking about here when he said, "As I have loved you, so you must love one another".

What Jesus says is quite plain...that we should love others in the same way that Jesus loves us. A love that is sacrificial and self-giving. We see that on the cross.

It is easier to be selfish, to ignore the person who needs our love, to offer up any kind of excuse as to why we should not get involved in the lives of other people. It would seem that to love as Jesus has loved us is humanly impossible. We might manage it on the odd occasions, but loving others unconditionally and sacrificially all the time is a bit of a tall order.

But scripture states that our ability to love comes from our relationship with Jesus Christ, and understanding this is critical to our ability to live out the Christian life of love. The more the love of Jesus fills our lives, the more we will be able to love other with the same kind of love that he shows to us. It does not happen in a vacuum. Love is something that is passed from one person to another.

Child psychologists tell us that a child who does not receive love will not be able to give love. Yet, on the other hand, a child who has received the proper amount of nurturing as an infant and as a toddler will have a sense of security and trust that will last them all their lives. We see how the love that children show is dependent of the love they receive from their parents. In order to show Christlike love, we need to receive that love from Christ.

Look at it this way. Say you want to get fit, so you take up jogging. You buy a pair of top quality running shoes and a track suit and sprint down the street. Not far down the road your muscles begin to cramp, you get the stitch in your side, you can hardly get your breath. You slowly walk home gasping, "I'll never do that again".

That is called anaerobic running, or running without oxygen...caused by the body using up more oxygen than it takes in. Many people try to run that way, and many people try to love that way. They love with great fervor and self-sacrifice, but only lasts a while. No one can keep it up. Like the joggers, we find ourselves down the road in pain, gasping and cramped, saying, "I'll never do that again."

Love, like running, must be aerobic. Our output must be matched by our intake. Running requires oxygen....and an enduring love requires God's word, God's presence, the Holy Spirit, God's love and forgiveness. As we love aerobically, we will love not in our own strength and ability but the strength and ability that we receive from Jesus. We will love because he has first loved us.

To love as Jesus commands us means that we need to immerse ourselves, with the sacrifice of our hearts and lives, in his Word and Sacraments, and to let the love of Christ enter our lives and empower us to love, serve and work together. We will come to realize more and more our place in the family of God,

cast off everything that is opposed to love....things like impatience, selfishness, greed, an uncaring attitude, an unforgiving spirit...so we can be led by the Spirit and be more Christ-like in everything we say and do.

There is a story about a man who had a huge boulder in his front yard. He grew tired of this big, unattractive stone in the center of his lawn, so he decided to turn it into an object of art. He went to work on it with hammer and chisel, and chipped away at the huge boulder until the ugly stone became a beautiful running deer. When he finished, it was gorgeous, breath-taking.

A neighbor asked, "How did you ever carve such a marvelous likeness of a deer?" The man answered, "I just chipped away everything that didn't look like a deer!"

If you have anything in your life right now that doesn't look like love, then, with the help of God, chip it away! If it does not look like compassion or mercy or empathy, then, with the help of God, chip it away!

Is it obvious that there is something different about you that make people wonder, "What is it that makes that person so likeable and so easy to get on with"? Jesus said, "If you have love for one another, then everyone will know that you are my disciples."

This command of Jesus is one that we take too lightly, because it seems way out of our reach. Seems almost impossible because we fail at it, again and again. That is not to say that because we are such poor lovers that we should give up. But it does mean that we need the love of Christ more than ever

before...his unconditional, never-failing love to forgive us for our lack of love.

Thanks be to God that Jesus does not love us to the extent that we love others, but rather creates the potential for us to love unconditionally and sacrificially....in the ways that we can envision exists in the heart of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

Amen.