

November 15, 2015



## **“What Does Love Look Like? You Are What You Love”**

Sermon by Rev. Patricia Farris

*John 15:9-13*

*As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love. 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. I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete.*

*'This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends.*

A few weeks ago, one of our long-time couples was leaving church. The wife said: “I really like this series on ‘What Does Love Look Like.’ How many more weeks will it last?” I thought for a second and said: “two.” The husband shook his head and quipped: “I don’t know....that’s A LOT of love!”

We all got a good chuckle. But he’s right, of course. That’s A LOT of love! Love that we’ve seen before us and among us through these Sundays of our annual financial stewardship campaign. Love in the faces of children, youth, adults, seniors. Love in the portraits included in the Sentinel newsletters. Love in the bells of the Mark Twain Ringers. Love in the tears we shed on Laity Sunday and during our All Saints remembrance. Love on the cakes the youth made for last Sunday’s charge conference. Did you see the one with white icing, a black steeple, sprinkles and the words “Happy 140 Years!” Another white icing, red heart, and “#LoveLooksLike” picking up on our outreach on our Facebook page to invite folks to send in their messages and photos of what love looks like at First UMC.

I have a feeling that we’ve all had the eyes of our heart wide open over these weeks, seeing love and on one another’s faces and giving thanks for how that love reflects the love of God that heals and transforms us from the inside out “Every person matters. You matter” our banner proclaims. We experience that here. This is love that creates a feeling of belonging, of coming home. Love that tells the story of God’s work in our lives. Love that sends us forth to share that love with others. Love that gives life to service and mission to transform the world. When we say “God is real. God is love” we mean it. We know it. We live it.

We talk a lot about mission around here. Whether it’s here in our community or across the nation or around the world: monthly meals at Family Shelter, the upcoming Thanksgiving meal to share with the residents of Family Place and Family Shelter or mission trips to New Orleans, Appalachia, and Haiti. A long time ago, St. Augustine said this: “What does love look like?” he asked. “It has the hands to help others. It has the feet to hasten to the poor and needy. It has eyes to see misery and want. It has the ears to hear the sighs and sorrows of [all people]. That is what love looks like.”

Our youth get it. Most of you know that we sent a Youth Service team of 19 youth to New Orleans last summer. The largest group we’ve ever sent. Do you know how that team was recruited? Pastor Robert sent out letters to the 23 active youth in our MYF inviting them to be part of the team. Of the 23, 1 was on the fence, 3 had prior commitments related to school or family plans. 19 of the 23 said “YES. Count me in.” That’s awesome. That’s proof positive of the impact this congregation is having on our children and youth. If you think that the words “Together We Can Change the World” is just a slogan, think again.

And how the world needs our kind of love just now. We who stand with and pray with and study with and share meals with our Muslim neighbors to create relationships of love, friendship, understanding, trust, and support. Indeed—“Together We Can Change the World..”

This is love you can bank on. This is something worth investing in—investing yourself, your time and your gifts, investing your money, investing your hopes and dreams and prayers. This is nothing new here. We’ve been at it now for over 140 years. Our history testifies to the impact this love has had on countless lives here and around the world. And now---there is so much more we can and need to be doing. And I firmly believe that we have the resources to grow the mission and ministries of this congregation to meet the needs and the opportunities of this present moment.

Our giving patterns here are pretty typical of most mainline congregations. It’s not a fabulous picture. Most of us give approximately 2.5% of our income. Do you know that during the Depression, giving levels were at 3.3%? We can do better. We can all grow towards the biblical guideline of the 10% tithe. I’ve shared with you before that David and I have tithed—10% off the top—our whole married lives. It’s our starting point and

everything else works out from there. This is how we grew up, what we learned from our parents and grandparents. It all comes from God, they taught. And the only faithful thing to do is to say “thank you” and to give a significant chunk back so that God’s work can go on in this world through the church.

I commend to you the spiritual practice and journey of generosity, of giving back, giving thanks, of grounding your lives and your giving in the generous love of God.

And let me add one more thing. Just like most other congregations, some of us—about 20% give regularly through pledge or envelope giving. That means that we have tremendous untapped potential from our members and constituents, friends and visitors, to be giving in greater numbers. Tremendous potential. God has placed us in a growing, thriving community of singles, families, children, youth, seniors, empty nesters, looking for meaning, looking for ways to give back, looking for community that nurtures children and youth in practices and values that form their lives. God has placed us in a community where charitable giving is above average, but not religious giving. There is tremendous potential here among us and right outside our doors.

We are only limited by our imagination, our creativity, and our commitment. What does love look like? On this Consecration Sunday, I invite every single one of us to step up and put ourselves in the picture. Step-up. Take your place. Connect. Commit. Live whole-heartedly, loving God who is love with the whole of your heart, your mind, your soul and your strength. And your neighbor as yourself.

Yep. This is indeed A LOT of love. It’s tough love that indeed changes us and the world from the inside out. Because you know what? We are what we love. We are what we love. And there are many things that will pull us away from the love of God, habits that creep in, ways of spending our time, our money, the very gift of life itself that may not show forth our deepest commitment to the One for whom we were made, the One who give us life, the One who shows us total love in the example of Christ Jesus.

Consecration Sunday is, yes, about making our financial pledge to support the mission and ministry of the church in the coming year. But it is much more. Consecration is about the sanctification of our lives by dedicating ourselves to God and God’s work through the church. It is about our deep desire to be more holy, to lead a life worthy of our calling, for we have been called by God, the Apostle Paul tells us.

What does love look like? It looks like disciples, followers of Christ, all those earnestly seeking to grow into his likeness and to magnify his name through our own lives. Every aspect of our lives. Every choice we make. Every commitment we dare. Every hope and dream we cherish.

May God bless us with courage and vision and a future with hope. It’ll take A LOT of love. But fortunately, that’s exactly what God supplies.

Thanks be to God. AMEN

Notes:

James K. Smith. *You Are What You Love: The Spiritual Power of Habit*. Brazos Press (forthcoming).

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