

October 25, 2015



“What Does Love Look Like? Show Me the Money”

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.

OK. Are you all ready for the 9th Mark of a Methodist? A big groan is quite appropriate here since I sort of promised to knock it off. But it's like one of those songs you get in your head and just can't shake. Keeps on repeating. Marks of a Methodist. Marks of a Methodist.

So just to put it out there for you—let's call it the 9th Mark of a Methodist—a Methodist has 20-20 vision. I'm know I'm really stretching it beyond all credulity here, but what I mean is this. A Methodist sees clearly. With glasses. With contacts. With the naked eye. After lasik surgery. After cataract surgery. Whatever. A Methodist sees clearly. A Methodist has 20-20 heart vision. A Methodist knows what love looks like.

I know this because I saw and heard it for myself right here in this sanctuary last Sunday. From all our wonderful folks who led our Laity Sunday service. From Jennifer Scott and Anne Premer who opened their hearts and shared with us what they saw so very clearly. What they see. “Love looks like you,” they said, looking out at us. Love looks like you. And they said: “that love, your love, has changed my life.”

If you were here last Sunday, you know exactly what I mean. And if you weren't, when you're home later today, go to our website, santamonicaumc.org, and listen to what they said. Please--don't just take it from me. Hear it from them. See us through their eyes. This is what love looks like: love looks like you.

All through this week, various ones of you have been telling me that because of Jennifer and Anne's testimony last Sunday, you see us in a new light, too. “I hadn't realized,” you said...”I took it for granted,” you said...”I didn't really realize how powerful this love can be,” you said...”how it really does change lives and draw people closer to God in Christ. How it makes such a difference in this world and in the lives of everyone who walks through this door.”

Amazing grace, Chaya sang—thank you so very much, and thanks to all you wonderful Mark Twain Ringers—amazing grace-- was blind, but now I see. In our caring, in our praying, in our music, in our serving, in our giving...this is what love looks like.

I know that last Sunday the eyes of our hearts were open to new ways of seeing the love of God manifest through the ministries and mission of First UMC. And our hearts are open today through this beautiful music. So it might seem jarring to see the title of today's sermon which really was not “the 9th Mark of a Methodist” but rather: “What Does Love Look Like: Show Me the Money.” We're in our annual fall pledge drive. It's that time of year when we ask one another to seriously consider our part in making all this happen. Knowing that those of you who are new to the congregation, and even many who've been around a long time, don't really know what it takes, financially, to keep this ship afloat, I'm going to go behind the scenes today and show you the financial infrastructure that makes it possible for love to shine through.

The insert in today's Order of Worship answers some “frequently asked questions” about giving and pledging and our church's finances. Look it over. Think about it. And plan to stay after worship two weeks from today for our annual church conference and celebration of our 140th anniversary as a community of faith here in Santa Monica. That will be another opportunity to see more of what love looks like and get more of your questions answered about the money it takes—where it comes from and where it goes.

We're very fortunate and we are careful stewards, as a church, of all that God and 140 years of faithful giving, have bestowed upon us. We draw on several sources of income—use of our beautiful facilities which we work hard to maintain and make available to appropriate non-profits in the community. Designated gifts and endowed funds, administered by our Trustees and our Methodist Foundation. Income from our Preschool which depends significantly on our facilities and staff time and is a thriving, growing school with one whole new additional class just started this year.

And our most significant income stream—our giving. We are a living, growing organism, a community of faith, people called together by God to be the Body of Christ in this time in this community, standing on the shoulders of 140 years of faithful disciples. Our giving does two things: our giving puts our money where our heart is AND our giving changes our hearts as we let the generosity of God's love for us transform us into generous and grateful people. This is why our giving is the most significant of all our sources of money—while making possible all the ministries and mission that show forth God's love in this community and around the world, our generous giving changes us, from the inside out, over time forming us more nearly into the image of God who, after all, gave everything that we might know love in Christ Jesus, our Lord and Savior.

Now let me share with you what is admittedly a huge challenge in making my case here this morning. We look so prosperous, don't we? You know, the first little church I served barely had 2 nickels to rub together, and no outside sources of income. So when something broke or anything needed to happen, everyone banded together to pull it off. Bake sales, carwashes...everyone chipped in and everyone knew for a fact that their gift was crucial. There was a woman in that

congregation, a quiet saint, who, when the church was in desperate need, literally tore out the brick walk from the street to her front door, in order to sell the bricks and give the money to the church.

For better and for worse, we here don't experience the need quite so clearly. Growing up, I often heard my dad talk about this challenge. He was an accountant and so he served forever on the Finance Committee of our home church, the First UMC in Phoenix, Arizona, a church much like this one with a big beautiful sanctuary and extensive staff and ministry. He said: "people sit here and look around and think—my gift isn't needed. We're obviously doing quite well."

That may happen here, too. Which is why I'm talking about this today. The money to support all this doesn't come—directly anyway, from heaven. It comes through us. It comes from us. It comes from all those who went before us and gave sacrificially and gave through their wills and estate planning that we might now be the honored stewards of all that has been entrusted to us and that we might now do our part to make sure that this congregation thrives now and long into the next 140 years.

Where does our money go, you might well ask? It goes to support our mission in four primary areas: 1. Our worship life—worship is the center and energy of our life as the Body of Christ. Worship sustains us week in and week out. Worship encompasses teaching, spiritual formation, and sends us all into service and mission. Worship is also outreach—most of our new members find their way into the life of our congregation through worship.

2. Congregation and Community Care-- Through all the ages and stages of life, the grace and love of God flow through our pastors, staff, small groups, volunteers and congregation. From the birth of a baby to times of illness and grief, through all the joys and challenges of life, we support and care for one another relying on the assurance of God's grace.

3. Children, Youth and Families-- The lives of children, youth, and families of all kinds are at the heart of our mission. "Welcome, Baby" gifts, weekly Preschool Chapel, our new Deep Blue Sunday School curriculum and Children's Church, UM Youth Fellowship, Vacation Bible School, Scouts, Children's After School Theater (CAST)... our giving touches lives and welcomes new generations into the love and power of God.

4. Local and world outreach-- Our giving touches people we may never meet or know. From Upward Bound House across the street, to New Orleans, Appalachia, and Haiti—wherever God's people are hungry or in need, our giving supports missions, disaster relief, ministry education and training. Across the street and around the world, our giving makes real the love of God for all God's people.

In a week or so, you will receive in the mail a letter outlining all this and a 2016 pledge card. Of course, you may always give or make your pledge on-line at any time. This year your Finance Committee and Staff-Parish Relations Committee are asking you to do two things. First is to search your heart and make a pledge that reflects the value of what love looks like through the ministries and mission of this congregation. And secondly, to go beyond that and make a stretch gift for 2016 that will not only continue all that's here now but move us towards our pre-2008 staffing levels. To grow into the future God is making possible for us, we need a full-time Director or Pastor of Children, Youth and Family Ministries. We need a Health Ministry Parish Nurse. And we need more administrative support in our church office.

Make your pledge and then add a stretch-gift on top of that. You know, the Chair of our Board of Trustees has a wonderful way of asking: "What could we do if we had more money?" Let me tell you-- your pastors, Lay leaders, Church Council and staff have plans and dreams galore. Just as you do, we see the hurts and needs of our community and of our world. We see the challenges facing families, seniors, and youth. We see into the hearts of so many all around us longing for God's love and God's peace without sometimes even knowing what it is they truly hunger for. We see clearly what more God has for us to do.

We are Methodists. We have 20-20 vision. We see with the eyes of the heart and with the clear-headed thinking of those who came all the way out from Los Angeles to the seaside outpost of Santa Monica 140 years ago and planted a new congregation in Brady's Hardware Store and, as they say, the rest is history.

But of course it's not just history. It's our story. And it's our future and God's future and it is bright and faithful and beautiful. Be a part of the picture--this is what love looks like.

Thanks be to God.

Amen.