

A SERMON PREACHED ON SUNDAY, MAY 6, 2018,

AT BETHANY BEACH CHRISTIAN CHURCH, BETHANY BEACH, DE

Sherlock Holmes and his good friend Dr. Watson go on a camping trip. After a good dinner and a bottle of wine, they retire for the night, and go to sleep. Some hours later, Holmes wakes up and nudges his faithful friend. "Watson, look up at the sky and tell me what you see." "I see millions and millions of stars, Holmes" replies Watson. "And what do you deduce from that?" Watson ponders for a minute. "Well, Astronomically, it tells me that there are millions of galaxies and potentially billions of planets. Astrologically, I observe that Saturn is in Leo. Horologically, I deduce that the time is approximately a quarter past three. Meteorologically, I suspect that we will have a beautiful day tomorrow. Theologically, I can see that God is all powerful, and that we are a small and insignificant part of the universe." But what does it tell you, Holmes?" Holmes is silent for a moment. "Watson, you idiot!" he says. "Someone has stolen our tent!"ⁱ

Sometimes not even our best friends can save us from ourselves and our perceptions. But surrounding oneself with one's friends is so essential that Jesus dedicates an entire portion of the gospels to it. He knew how much he depended on them. Though we call them disciples or apostles, and he at times called them servants, Jesus is most often on record as calling them "brothers and sisters" or intimate friends. This week's gospel reading is a continuation of last week's, but the focus switches to loving one another and the difference it makes when and if we do so. In what biblical critics call Christ's farewell discourse, this reading shows how on the night of his arrest, Jesus taught his disciples about the relationship they would have with him. Those who abide in his word and his love would bear fruit, for apart from him, they could do nothing.ⁱⁱ And he very rarely commands anything, but herein, he commands the disciples, and by extension therefore, he commands us, to love each other. Other than his command regarding communion, it is perhaps his greatest commandment, so we should sit up and take notice.

Yet it seems like a rather pedantic exercise, with a much expected response, that we should hear a sermon on how and why we are, as Christians, to love one another. After all, if we cannot grasp at first gleaning of the Bible that this was the central message of God to us, and the message of God's Son as well, than we really need to contemplate instead what we have been taking in all these years of churchgoing. While it is true that the sole message of some preachers is that God is love, the outcome has not matched the effort, one might say. Maybe that is the reason we need to hear more about loving one another; perhaps one day the message will sink in. Or perhaps there are more clever and moving ways to get the theme across.

The Internet is full of love stories, short, long, sad, joyful, inspirational and motivational. In looking at specific varieties I noticed that The Church of Latter Day Saints, or the Mormons, as we know them, have a corner on the market. It seems that the love we share with each other is high on their list of priorities and on how loving one another is the way in which a good member of LDS should act, more than any other denomination I encountered. I made a note to myself to look more into their readings and preachings to see if there were something we might learn from them. In doing so, I found an unrelated website called crosswalk.comⁱⁱⁱ with an article "How to Love One Another - - Even Other Christians" from Gerald L. Sittser's book *Love One Another: Becoming the Church that Jesus Longs For*; it is quite good and refreshing in what it had to share. It states:

"His extroverted personality annoys you. She seems too quiet. He favors a liturgical worship style, while you like a contemporary one. Her political views are too liberal for your conservative taste. Sound like any of the people at your church? You may dislike them or disagree with them, but their commitment to Christ makes them your spiritual brothers and sisters. If you fail to reach out to them in love as Christ calls you to, then your fractured relationships will do great damage to all involved. But if you take Christ's command to love them seriously, that love will become a powerful force for good – both in your church, and in the watching world.

Here's how you can learn to love other Christians – no matter what:

Remember what God intends the church to be. The church should be a foretaste of what the kingdom of heaven, the beloved community of God, will be like, with many vastly different people unified in their diversity by their love for Jesus Christ. It should be such a loving community that it's an incarnation of Christ's own sacrificial love. Realize that differences are normal and healthy; it's simply how you respond that tests whether or not you're willing to love. Keep God's desire for the church to be a loving community in mind. Don't settle for less, as far as it depends on you.

Welcome one another. Be willing to embrace people as they really are, rather than as you wish they would be. Remember that God doesn't play favorites; God generously loves all people, and hopes that you will, too. Don't reserve your love only for those who love you back, or who are similar to you in personality, religious conviction, interests, background, social status, economic level, race, culture, sexual orientation, etc. Ask God to help you accept all people as equally important because they've been made in the Divine image. When you interact with people, acknowledge them, show appreciation for their accomplishments, express affection for them, and say something that makes them feel blessed. Look for the best in people and overlook the worst whenever you can.

Be subject to one another. Instead of waiting for people and situations to conform to your wishes (which is futile), invite God to use difficult people and situations to transform you according to God's wishes – into someone who's more like Christ. Rather than insisting on pursuing your own agenda or protecting your own rights, trust God to do what's best for you in challenging circumstances.

Forbear one another. Let your gratitude for how often God has shown forbearance to you – loving you despite your many mistakes and weaknesses – motivate you to give other people the room to be who they are, despite all their imperfections. Remember that we're all works in progress. Pray to have the humility, patience, grace, and humor you need to accept people without judging them, and to encourage them to be themselves around you. Keep in mind that, while Christians need to stand for essential beliefs such as Christ's divinity, there's plenty of room for different ways of expressing faith. Rather than trying to change people who bother you, pray for them and trust God to change them in the best ways and at the best times. Don't deny people opportunities to serve simply because they have flaws. Accept and affirm the valuable contributions that imperfect people make through Christian service. Be willing to listen respectfully to people who don't share your point of view on an issue, yet still share faith in Christ. Allow yourself to learn from their perspectives.

Encourage one another. Live with integrity so you can encourage others with a good example of what faith in action looks like. Carefully consider the impact of your attitudes and actions on other people; strive to be positive. Reach out to discouraged people in creative ways, such as by writing them cards or letters, or inviting them to meals at your home. Catch people doing something right, and let them know that you've noticed and appreciate their efforts. Whenever you spend time with your friends, do all you can to encourage each other.

Comfort one another. Suffering can unite people in powerful ways because it reveals their common need for God. Divisions and conflicts often appear trivial in the face of suffering. Make room in your life for broken and grieving people. Whenever you encounter someone who has suffered a loss, think and pray about what you can do to help: from providing child care, meals, or job training, to simply listening to them share their stories. Don't minimize, exaggerate, or trivialize grief. Instead, point grieving people to the source of real hope – Christ – and let your shared hope in Christ draw you closer to each other.

Bear one another's burdens. Accept the reality of that following God's call to bear other's burdens will be costly, inconvenient, and disruptive. Try to do so anyway. Be available and flexible for when asked to help bear someone's

burden. Seek to help burdened people take responsibility for their problems and get back on their feet, rather than fostering dependence on you. Hold them accountable for their attitudes and actions while providing the support they need to grow. Realize that it's not possible for you to help everyone you know who needs help; God only expects you to help the people God leads you help – and only in the specific ways God guides you to help them. Pray for discernment about who you should help, and how. Combine a sympathetic attitude with good judgment. As you help others, keep in mind that you're not superior to them. When someone helps you, remember that you're not inferior to them. Realize that everyone needs help at various times. Let your shared experiences of helping and being helped deepen your love for the fellow believers around you.

Stir up one another. It's dangerous to get complacent about your faith. Get out of your comfort zone and help other people get out of theirs. Do all you can to inspire and challenge others to follow the Spirit's lead each day and take creative action in the specific directions the Spirit leads them. Meet with other Christians regularly and talk with them often about what's most important to them, and why. Invest your time, money, or talents in some of their causes. Let go of an attachment to the familiar, the past, a desire to control, or anything else that stands in the way of pursuing something new that God might be calling you to pursue."^{iv}

Note that these are all friendly things to do, but loving as well. We see through the gospel text and the commentary that I shared that Jesus has brought about a change in relationality; he clarifies how he regards his disciples. They are not strangers, nor merely disciples, and certainly not just servants: they are friends. Jesus notes the reason he calls them "friends" is he has shared the riches of all he has with them, in terms of his relationship with God. "I have made known to you everything..." he says. Here Jesus' offer of the intimacy of friendship is overwhelming. To appropriate Jesus the Risen Lord is to be invited into that friendship with God. Friends of God! The reality of friendship with Jesus offers, in one of America's favorite words these days, *transparency*. To know the Risen Christ is to know the heart of God.^v

That is in fact what we have been about these past six weeks since Easter Sunday. Thus by the end of today's liturgy we can say that we have literally trekked through John's gospel, mining the themes of love and friendship and true discipleship. Next week we celebrate the Ascension (and Mother's Day!), and the week following, Pentecost, both of which continue the theme of the love of God while at the same moment carrying forth that clever and moving new approach I spoke about earlier. For what can be more clever than leaving your spirit with someone so that they know you will always be with them?

So in the meantime, until the Spirit arrives into our hearts, we seek to find it in our daily universe so that it might enter our souls. Unless of course you're this young man (as related by joke buddha.) "There was a boy riding on his bike outside a church. The priest saw him and told him to come into the church and the boy said, "... This is a rough neighborhood. Somebody might steal my bike." The priest explained how the Holy Spirit would take care of it, so they went inside. The priest showed the boy how to make the sign of the cross and told the boy to repeat it. The boy intoned "In the name of the Father, The Son... Amen." The priest said, "What about the Holy Spirit?" The boy replied, "All I got say is that it better be outside taking care of my bike!"^{vi}

I ask you, therefore, love one another, wherever the bike of your soul may take you.

Amen.

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ⁱ <https://empwaynek.wordpress.com/2011/02/11/watson-you-idiot-someone-has-stolen-our-tent/>

ⁱⁱ Sundays and Seasons, Year B, 2018, p. 171

ⁱⁱⁱ <https://www.crosswalk.com/faith/spiritual-life/how-to-love-one-another-even-other-christians-11577126.html>

^{iv} *Ibid.*

^v http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=310

^{vi} Adapted from http://www.jokebuddha.com/joke/Holy_Spirit_2#ixzz5EDSNjelH