

“Shared Love”
John 15:9-17
Rev. Andrew Connors
6th Sunday in Easter
May 9, 2021

When was the last time you felt loved? It's an uncomfortable question yet it's the one that many people come back to when they are honest with their therapist, or their partner, or their parent, or their friend. It's often on the hearts of those whose deathbeds I have visited. It's on the minds of teenagers and seniors alike. Will I find love, and find places to share it, or did I during this lifetime? It's a question that comes up on Mother's Day when so many celebrate love they received from their mothers, while still others grieve its absence.

It's an uncomfortable question, yet the promise to be loved and the invitation to share it is the core curriculum in John's Gospel. “Abide in my love,” Jesus tells the disciples using that Greek word “meno” which appears 40 different times in John's Gospel - translated “abide,” “stay,” “remain.” “Love,” according to Johannine scholar Karoline Lewis, “is not an abstract concept in this Gospel but is deeply grounded in God's decision to dwell as Jesus in the world.” She points to two other places in John's Gospel where love is defined. “God so loved the world,” Jesus tells Nicodemus in chapter 3, “that God gave God's only begotten son, that whosoever believes in him should not perish but have everlasting life.” God's decision to dwell with us in Jesus defines love and gives evidence for it in the world. The second reference point is Jesus' washing the feet of his disciples. Jesus invites his disciples to experience love not as an idea but in this concrete, physical experience of God with us. “The entirety of [John's] Gospel,” Dr. Lewis writes, “has been not only Jesus revealing what God's abundant love is but *creating experiences to feel* this abundant love.”¹

Now let's be honest - Presbyterians get a “D” in the “feeling” subject area. Most of us were taught to retreat from the rough waters of feeling to the safe harbors of the rational brain. We're better at explaining love than creating experiences to feel it. We're way better at glorifying God, in the words of the Westminster Catechism, than we are at enjoying God as that same catechism prescribes. Some of us were taught that feelings are dangerous, or misleading, or fleeting as if our humanity itself were not in the same temporal category. And yet today scientists have shown us that our rational brains are so often hijacked by the feeling part of ourselves so that even when you think that your rational self is guiding the vessel of your life, your feelings are actually whispering in the ear of your ship's captain.²

¹ Karoline M. Lewis, *John*, Fortress Biblical Preaching Commentaries, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press), 2014, Kindle location 198-199.

² See especially Jonathan Haidt, *The Righteous Mind*, (New York: Vintage Press), 2013.

Feminists have challenged this derision of feelings for years as patently sexist and harmful to bodies and to the earth. Our feelings are legitimate ways of knowing - a critical part of emotional intelligence which is a core part of being human. Anti-racist trainers have retaught many of us to trust the uneasy feeling in our gut telling us that something is wrong in a conversation, or an encounter with others, rather than retreating to our rational brains that so often explain away injustice unfolding in our very presence. Community organizers have actively sought out people whose felt anger not only serves as evidence of their moral compass but also as barometers of their courage to challenge deathly powers that need to be changed. And yet still, so many of us when afraid, or insecure or anxious suppress those emotional signposts in favor of an unfeeling rationality that is ruthless in its lack of affection for the other.

Jesus doesn't say think about my love. He doesn't ask his disciples to "consider, examine, or research" his love. No. He says, "abide in my love." Remain in it. Stay in it. And he creates experiences for his disciples to feel this abundant love. Peter Bruun, the artist who came to Brown Memorial several years ago to lead us in a love letters project was recently interviewed for a podcast created by Anna Connors, my eldest daughter. Peter, as you may recall, lost his daughter to an overdose in 2014. As a way of working through his own grief and seeking healing through community, Peter created the New Day Campaign, a series of events that invited artists, people with substance abuse disorders, people with mental illness, and those recovering from trauma of many kinds into the same space. They held dozens of events over a 3 month period in 2015 with crowds ranging from 7 people to 700. Peter explained that in every one of those gatherings they had no idea if people had gathered because of the art or the addiction. The gathering included people who were really public about their addiction or trauma and people who were not out about it. As a result everyone felt safe. Each program included at least one person who offered testimony - their personal experience of pain and their journey toward healing. And then they would open it up to the audience. Peter explained that out of the 63 events that they held, there was at least one moment at every community conversation "when someone would raise their hand in front of a room full of people who they did not know. . .and they said 'I've never said this in public before, but I have bipolar disorder [or] my son is addicted to heroin [or] I attempted suicide when I was 20 years old.'" There was such incredible sharing," Peter said, "and release and healing framed by art and music and uplift. It was actually joyous and there was such a profound sense of community and acceptance and connection and release from all of that stigma and shame." He created experiences where participants could feel and share love.³

Peter's vision to me sounds a lot like the kind of community that Jesus was trying to create with his disciples. Where love is experienced and shared. Eco-theologians

³ Peter Bruun, interviewed by Anna Connors,
<https://trauma-rest-healing.wixsite.com/glbl450h/community-healing>

have pointed out recently that those experiences are deeply embedded in the gifts of creation. Jesus points to things that can be seen, touched, and tasted in and through the gifts of creation to bear witness to the unseen God who sent him. He turns water to wine at a wedding feast. He compares himself to living water that will quench the deepest thirst. He is bread that satisfies and light that illumines. He is experienced in and through the gifts of creation. Robert Kysar says it this way: “The Ultimate Reality of the universe—God— is to be experienced through a grasp of the mundane sensory experiences of life!”⁴ It’s not an accident that so many people - whether grounded in church or not - report a profound sense of spirituality and connection when closest to the gifts of creation.

Norman Wirzba in his groundbreaking chapter entitled, “Eating Jesus,” argues that the communion feast that we participated in last week together is essential for understanding what it means to abide in Jesus. There are two forms of eating, he argues. The normal form that we know is one in which another living - which is the food that I eat - is broken down within me, absorbed by me for my own benefit. But he says there is the kind of eating that Jesus offers where the other is not completely absorbed by me, but where I *remember* and *host* the other within me. “The other, that is Jesus,” he writes, “continues to live on inside of me not as de-formed matter but as food that in-forms and re-forms life from the inside.” This different kind of eating, he argues changes the way we relate to others and to the world. “Rather than engaging [others] primarily in utilitarian terms, absorbing them to suit personal needs and satisfaction, eaters of Jesus are invited to extend his ministries of attention and welcome, feeding and forgiving, and healing and reconciliation. . . Eaters of Jesus thus become hosts to the world who consider, respect, and serve the integrity of those who co-abide with them. In this co-abiding we honor the grace of life and witness to the power of love as the desire for another to freely be and develop.”⁵

Wirzba says that this co-abiding is not limited to humans alone. That when we say grace at the table we are, in fact, “calling to mind the gift and the sacrifice of non-human life that food is.”⁶ That is, we recognize that everytime we eat, we are acknowledging our foundational connection to creation. Honoring the life of creatures that we take into our very bodies, connecting us to each other, to all of creation, and to the creator herself. God in the world, becomes God within and between us.

That shared love is ultimately what Jesus commands of his disciples. Notice that while Jesus lays down his life for the world, he does not ask his disciples to lay down their lives for him. Instead, he asks them to lay down their lives for each other. To create a community of friends whose love is so real and true that it flows freely,

⁴ Quoted shared by Dr. Frances Taylor Gench in a conversation with The Well Preaching group, April, 2021.

⁵ Norman Wirzba, “Eating Jesus,” *Food and Faith: A Theology of Eating*, (New York: Cambridge University Press), 157-158.

⁶ Ibid, 158.

reciprocally, one to another. A community that is created not through bloodlines, or family, or nation, but friends - people called together from the world to fashion community out of love that God has given to them. A community that includes creation itself.

One of the things that Frances Taylor Gench shared with my preaching group a few weeks ago, is the image of Jesus as Gardener. This image has been strong throughout the history of the church. You can see it in the art that we're displaying on screen right now.⁷

*Lavinia Fontana
(Italian, 1552–1614),
Noli me tangere, 1581.
Uffizi Gallery, Florence, Italy.*



Jesus with garden implements meeting Mary after his resurrection. Mary, you will recall, mistook Jesus for the gardener. The contemporary church has tended to emphasize Mary's mis-identification as a mistake.

⁷ Special thanks to Dr. Frances Taylor Gench for these images and the corresponding captions.



Battista Franco (16th
century)



Lambert Sustris (1548-1560) (Flemish)

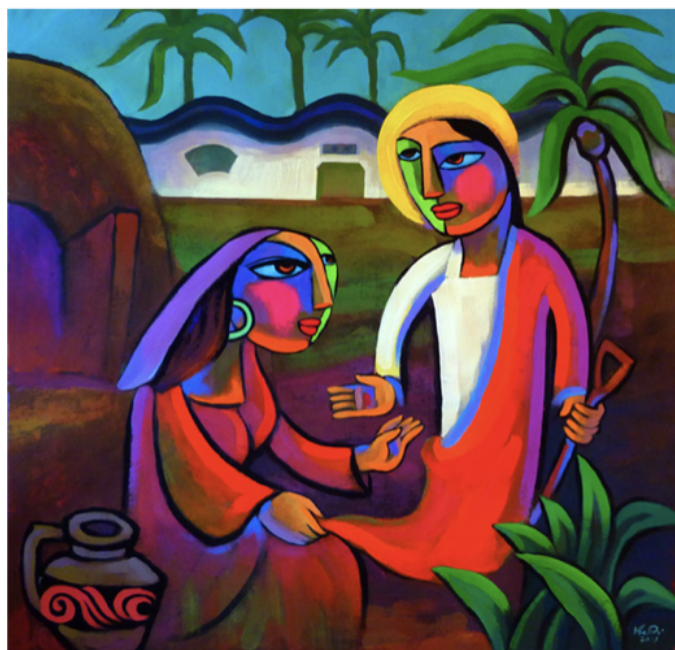
But the church through history saw her identification as prophetic.

ca. 1503-1504 (England)



Jesus is gardener to the world, tending the garden back toward its perfect origins, recognizing the gifts within creation and within us, cultivating those gifts in such a way that creation and we are being returned to their original purpose.

*He Qi
(Chinese, 1950–),
Do Not Hold On to
Me, 2013.*



*Graham Sutherland
(British, 1903–1980),
Noli me tangere, 1961.
St. Mary Magdalene Chapel,
Chichester Cathedral, England.*



Everytime we strengthen the gifts that we have been given instead of focusing more on the deficits that we have inherited, we move closer to the hope and the image of God that is our core nature.

Włodzimierz Kohut,
Jezus Dobry Ogrodnik
[Jesus the Good Gardener], 2015.



Peter Bruun explained on Anna's podcast that his vision for the New Day Campaign originated with the director of a healing community where Peter's daughter lived before she died. Her death was not the fault of that community, Peter said. In fact, it was the place where she had experienced significant healing. The director came to Baltimore to do a talk and introduced his talk by saying, "I've been involved with healing communities for decades, and I really care about healing communities, but what I'm passionate about is making the world itself more like a healing community."⁸ That's not far off from Jesus' vision for the church. A group of people whose attention to experiences of love in God's world and in each other serves to make the world itself closer to how God created it to be. Friends, who despite the deficits that they have

⁸ Peter Bruun, interviewed by Anna Connors,
<https://trauma-rest-healing.wixsite.com/global450h/community-healing>

inherited in themselves, or their families, or the world itself, experience God's love and create new experiences for others to feel it, too.

Yesterday, seated in a cafe, discussing church life with a friend who is not particularly religious, I was asked how it is that I can believe in God with the world in such a mess. With the climate warming, so much hate and death in the history of the world, and so much carnage in Baltimore. I told her I couldn't really explain all that. Why God - who we so often speak of as all powerful and all knowing - often seems so absent or anemic. What I could believe, I told her, is that God seems to enter our world so often in the centers of our pain - the brokenness of our lives and the groaning of creation. I can't explain why God chooses that kind of seemingly small entry into our world. I just know that our job is to recognize God's presence and host her when she arrives. To recognize the divine coming close to us in the depth of our darkness, our despair, our broken relations in the world, and to greet God as best we can with humility and with love. Just then, she gasped, pointing across the street to what appeared to be a homeless woman pushing her walker, trudging up the street. Another person - who appeared to be a stranger - had gone over and embraced her. A full hug in the middle of hug-less times, offered to a person who is more than her homelessness, more than the injustice that has befallen her. A tiny experience of love shared, inexplicably, on a Baltimore city street.

Two people, abiding in God's love - experiencing love and revealing it for what it is - the desire for another to freely be and develop. The desire that includes not just human beings but this grace-filled world that Jesus the Gardener invites us to tend.