

## With Open Hearts

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### **Scripture reading**

*John 13:33-35*

*from The Message by Eugene Peterson*

*Children, I am with you for only a short time longer. You are going to look high and low for me. But just as I told the Jews, I'm telling you: "Where I go, you are not able to come."*

*Let me give you a new command: Love one another. In the same way I loved you, you love one another. This is how everyone will recognize that you are my disciples – when they see the love you have for each other.*

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"Until one has loved an animal, a part of one's soul remains unawakened." These are the words of Francois-Anatole Thibault, a Nobel Prize winning French poet and author of the early 20th century. Though it is not my purpose this morning to shame anyone who does not keep a pet under their roof, I would invite those of us who are pet lovers to take a moment and tap into those inexplicable feelings we have toward our pets. There is the feline who refuses to recognize any boundary whatsoever, resentful of every closed door that prevents her/him from touching noses with you. Then there is the canine who licks your face in the middle of the night for no particular reason, and who greets you in the morning with those trusting, playful eyes saying, "Let's go for a walk, and then have some breakfast, and then you can stay home and rub my tummy all day long."

If you're not an animal lover, let's talk about baby humans – cuddly, soft, and helpless baby humans. The feelings we have about them are sort of automatic when it's our own child or grandchild, but it's also very easy to experience the same welling-up when we see the infants of strangers in the park or in the grocery line. What captivates us is their perfect vulnerability, and our involuntary response is that we become vulnerable to them. They capture our hearts and take them hostage, and we don't care. Let's just stop and feel that for a moment.

Last week we spoke of open hands, the kind with which we hold the ministry and relationships of our spiritual community. We are part of this community, and yet we do not own it. We do not direct it. We serve it and let it become what Spirit creates. Today we speak of open hearts, or the ways we bring our vulnerabilities out in the open, so that we can create living and vital relationships with one another, with the world around us, with the divine. In today's gospel, Jesus tells his friends to love each other the way he loves them, and he predicts something that will indeed come to pass, that after his death they will become recognizable for how they love each other. What does this love really mean?

If we read the gospels closely, we find that everywhere Jesus went, he noticed the people living in the margins of their culture: people who were poor; people who were despised; people who were shamed by religious hypocrites; people who were hungry and thirsty; people without hope. And as he moved about noticing them, he healed them; he received them; he fed them and gave them drink; he gave them hope in a hopeless world. He loved them, he said. He saw their vulnerability, and in reaching out, he became vulnerable to them, so much so that he was ultimately martyred. He laid down his life for his friends, because that is what real love is.

When I was a young preacher, I'm certain that I must have preached dozens of very shallow sermons based on texts like this one. They would have been variations on a theme I learned from my mother when she'd poke her head out the back door and say, "Now, everybody play nice!" In other words: no fighting, no disagreements, everyone compromises, and things remain peaceful. My mother was a Quaker, after all. For her, the absence of conflict was in and of itself a virtue. But if I've learned one thing over the years it is that the presence of love does not always mean the absence of conflict. Take marriage or other domestic partnerships, for example. Do you love your partner? Do you ever disagree? I rest my case.

This teaching is not about playing nice in church. It's about opening our hearts to one another in a way that feels risky, but eventuates in honest communication. It's about speaking the truth in love, and allowing our conflicts to be mediated by the energy of vulnerability. The default mechanism is to lock ourselves down, to craft a crusty exterior that protects us from ever being hurt, and in the process we lose everything that radical love has to offer. The earliest followers of Jesus were known for this kind of love. We can be too.

Some of my fellow Christians might take exception to this, but I don't think Jesus of Nazareth had any intention of starting a new world religion. He already had one. He was Jewish, a Jewish reformer, perhaps the Martin Luther of his day. He looked at his religious community and noted its corruption. He looked at the political climate and noted its injustices. He called them out on all of it, but in personal relationships with his friends and followers, he practiced a radical love that was based on vulnerability, and after he was gone, at least for a century or two, "People of the Way" as they were called practiced it too. They were living, loving, dynamic groups of people gathered in homes or street corners or hillsides, sometimes hidden away in upper rooms to avoid being noticed. There they fed one another, reminded themselves of Jesus's teaching, and radically loved each other.

We should exercise some caution, though, about fancying ourselves as carrying on the traditions of the "early church," thereby making ourselves the contemporary expression of it. That's just pompous! There wasn't really a thing called the "early church." In the first two or three centuries of the common era, there were numbers of early "Christianities," if you will. Some of them were Jewish in flavor, and others were more Hellenistic or Roman. But they existed simply as cells of people who loved each other. They had an openness to their mystical traditions. Their sacred texts weren't texts at all to start with, but oral traditions handed to them by their elders. They were led by women and men alike, and they served as an antidote to the evil of their day. And they did not cease to exist when Constantine came along and "Christianized" the Empire, and "empire-ized" the church, squelching its spiritual life in a patriarchal quest for purity.

Today the church as an institution has a tendency to devolve into this very same thing. But the church as an organism has an opportunity to demonstrate the words of Jesus in brand new ways. The Community Congregational Church is that kind of organism. We are well-practiced in caring for one another. Our learning curve, though, is to be found in the inclusion of people we've not yet met, people who are often made vulnerable in the harsh environment of American culture, who are looking for answers to life's biggest questions. With them in mind, I leave you with the words we've already shared from C.S. Lewis:

*To love at all is to be vulnerable. Love anything and your heart will be wrung and possibly broken. If you want to make sure of keeping it intact you must give it to no one, not even an animal. Wrap it carefully round with hobbies and little luxuries; avoid all entanglements. Lock it up safe in the casket or coffin of your selfishness. But in that casket, safe, dark, motionless, airless, it will change. It will not be broken; it will become unbreakable, impenetrable, irredeemable. To love is to be vulnerable.*

So be it.