

Last week we started with our new series on the three movements of discipleship in the church: Godward, inward toward each other in the church and outward toward our community. This morning we are focusing on inward toward each other.

The story we read this morning is a story we tell every Holy Week: Jesus gets down on his knees, grabs a basin and washes his disciples' feet.

This is God! and God has given up power, sat on a knee and washed a feet, probably covered in dirt and grime and difficulty.

And then says to them: Love one another as I have loved you.

I love to think about the disciples in that moment....

Gathered around Jesus. Each from different places in Israel. Different backgrounds. A tax collector, a fisherman and many others all in the same room. All because of the same thing. Jesus.

That's the picture of the church.

Gathered from everywhere, together around Jesus.

Jesus. The one who has brought us into relationship, knowledge of God.

We are called out or called together because of the work of Christ. We don't gather here because we all are the same, or all like to drink coffee from the same pot, or have the same interests, or play the same game,

but we gather here because the Spirit has called us into the life of Christ. We are gathered because of what Christ has done to bring us into relationship with God, into the realization of God's love for us.

In almost every new testament description of the community of those who follow Christ this is emphasized.

But we gather around Christ.

Paul talks about this community—the church as a body of Christ. (1 Cor 12)

A body made up of eyes, ears, feet—all different parts, unique people, varying experiences, but together as one body and led by Christ.

He also says in Ephesians 2 that as different groups, in Christ, we are made into one new humanity. One new family in which all are welcome.

The church has taken this and says in our communion liturgies: we are many grains and many grapes gathered into one loaf, all sharing in the same cup.

We are many. We are varied. We are different. We are from all over the place. Yet we are all one, Gathered around Jesus. A new humanity.

We are invited to be like the disciples in our story: diverse, holding varying opinions, allowing each other to be at different places in their walk with Christ, bringing to the table our differing experiences and talents. But holding on to the one thing that unifies us: Christ.

All the disciples are in the room because of Jesus. All the disciples are having their feet washed by Jesus. And then all told, to do the same. To love one another as Jesus had loved them.

A new command: love one another as I have loved you.

What we see here in Jesus is a love that is generous, that takes initiative to get down and do what needs doing, that is self-giving, and gives up power to serve another, to welcome others to share in his life.

This giving and receiving of love knits us together in Christ.

The church is a community where we learn and practice what it means to love one another as Jesus has loved us.

It is a community where we learn what it means to be patient, to forgive, to receive, to belong, to give of ourselves, to welcome those we disagree with, to be kind.

It is a community of sanctification, where we become more like Christ and are disciplined in the way of Christ's love for one another.

Love one another as I have loved you:

Many of us have experienced woody nook as “a caring church in the country” where we are cared for and where we are disciplined. Where we belong, where we have known love and kindness of others for us.

Before I even showed up here, I had heard about you. How you were generous, how you cared for one another, reached out in times of need, how you gathered together to build barns, repair roofs, to make food when people needed it.

And as I’ve been hear longer, I’ve heard more stories and seen it in action. We are people who care deeply for one another and about what happens to each other. We seek to love one another.

I’ve heard how during COVID many of you made calls and sent cards, how you donated extra money to help those who might need it.

I’ve seen how you show up to grieve with others at funerals and make meals for them.

Or how you take on roles in the church that allow you to serve others and share your gifts/talents with us (sound, tech, maintenance, leading ministries, teaching kids in Sunday school, elders, deacons, food and hospitality).

We hear stories and concerns and prayer requests through the grapevine—which while sometimes is gossip, other times is true concern.

I’ve seen of how you joyfully celebrate life’s milestones, birthdays, anniversaries, babies; how small groups rally around one another in times of need.

How the newcomer to church is sought out by people in the fellowship hall and asked to lunch. How sometimes you even say hello to people in the pew even though you are not certain how long they’ve been there and you’ll look like a fool.

How you give each other jobs when someone needs it; taken care of your neighbors and friends without any encouragement.

How you’ve come alongside someone and walked with them, encouraging and supporting them so they could continue their journey with Jesus.

We are known for generosity and care for one another. We are loving one another all the while still learning how to love each others.

How have you, metaphorically speaking, taken a knee and become like Jesus? How have you seen others do that? What love can you celebrate? And how can you encourage one another to continue in those ways or invite each other into new ways of doing that?

If you imagine the disciples in the room again and take a look at them. You will recall: Judas betrays Jesus, Peter denies he ever knew Jesus, and every other totally abandons Jesus in his hour of greatest need.

They all fell short of love that day Jesus was led to his death.

And throughout the New Testament, you'll find they were ever falling short of love with one another, always growing in love for one another.

Though filled with the Spirit, though desiring to become like Jesus, we will not get it perfect every time and we will fall short of love.

We know and have experienced that care, love and kindness is not always the case in churches: it can seem we have it all together, but sometimes we scratch the surface and find out that there are gaps, things or people we forgot or overlooked, or a bunch of stuff we didn't know yet.

And we must humbly admit we're still learning to love and have fallen short again. we must be honest about it. Tell the truth about it so we can continue to grow in loving others as Christ has loved us.

Like every community we sometimes fall short of love. Here are some examples from other communities:

My car broke down and someone gave me a ride home. I'd never met him before but he told me this story of how many years ago he'd been excommunicated from his church because of a mistake he made rather than people coming alongside him to support him to bring about the change he needed.

I've also heard that loving single people can be a gap for many churches. Here's a story I found online: "Walking into church alone is awful!" admits Daniel, 31, from Oxfordshire. "One of the first questions people ask is, 'Are you married?'. It makes me feel so uncomfortable that I rarely go to church any more. I

recently accompanied a female friend to her church and she commented on how many more people approached her because they thought she was part of a couple... [It's like I haven't quite made it]"

Recently heard a story of how someone married into a community somewhere else. They married into a big family and the church thought she'd be cared for but she really just wanted a few friends and it took her a long time to become knit into the community that wasn't related to her.

I'm sure many of us have stories of the tragedy of love falling short. Yet, we are still encouraged to grow together in love.

When we have fallen short, Matthew 5 says: when you come to the altar to present your gifts, if you remember you have something against your brother and sister, leave it and go and make it right.

We are encouraged to tell the truth, look at it, and make amends.

The thing about love is: we don't need that lovely list in 1 Cor 13: "love is Patient, kind, it does not envy, is not rude or self-seeking" if everything is going to go just right.

We need that list for moments of conflict, in the middle of moments where we're tempted to not love.

What if the conflict, the falling short of love, the hurt is not something that means we've simply failed, but is an invitation into deeper transformation, a deeper journey into becoming more like Christ, to love more fully?

I had a conversation with a friend a while back who told me it was hard for them to experience love from me when I was impatient. I hadn't realized that, but after recognizing it, telling the truth about it, I was able to love this person better as I grew in patience.

When we fall short of love, we still have the opportunity to turn toward each other and to love one another as Christ has loved us.

Remember how after Jesus rose from the dead he went back to his disciples who thought they had failed and reinstated them, loved them by calling them back. I sometimes wonder how Jesus would've loved Judas if he had lived past Jesus' resurrection

So some questions to think about:

Who is no longer here that we need to reach out to in order to reconcile a relationship?

Who is not coming at all (demographic, age range, socio-economic bracket) that we need to be better at making space for?

What kind of language or kindness or behaviors need to be transformed?

What envy or grudges do we need to lay down?

What do we need to be encouraged towards instead? Or to be held accountable for?

All so that we can continue to love others as Christ has loved us. And to grow in the way of love and care for one another which the Spirit makes possible.

If you imagine back to Jesus washing the feet of the disciples—imagine Peter this time. Jesus comes to him, picks up his foot. And remember his reaction! NO LORD! You will not wash my feet!

Well said Jesus, to be part of me, you must.

And Peter came around.

I've have my feet washed by people a few times—other than in a pedicure situation. The weirdest one being me crouched on a bathroom counter while someone washed my feet as an action of following Jesus to love others.

But every time. It feel awkward and vulnerable. Suddenly after weeks of not thinking about my feet. I'm wondering: do my feet stink. There's something that really reminds you you are human and you don't always have it together.

Because you're nail sticks out funny, or there's that wart on your foot, or you have a bunion or you've got that callus, or you're missing a toe.

And you can't hide any of it when someone is up close and personal, scrubbing your feet.

Whether you're the one washing feet or the one having your feet washed, you feel vulnerable and exposed.

To have our feet washed we have to learn to receive that. Both people must learn to allow the vulnerability of that situation, to lean into allowing someone else to give to you. And this is complicated.

The same is true in love. It can be vulnerable and awkward. We can feel exposed.

But we must learn to receive love. To ask for help and care. Not just be the ones to give it.

a friend recently said to me, "now that I've gone through having a baby and received the care my friends gave me, I now know what it looks like to love and care for someone through their first months with a new kid. And I'm so excited to do so"

We receive love and care to so we know how to care for and love others more fully.

We learn that:

To be broken, struggling, in need of care, hurting, lonely, unable to do it all yourself, to need someone to help you learn to follow Jesus. This is not a sign of weakness, but an opportunity to lean on those around you, to be surprised at the love, care and kindness you received. And to know Christ's love more deeply so it can again flow from you to others.

How might you grow in allowing others in the community to love you?

How might you receive the love you are in need of by sharing your struggle and life with someone else?

(Maybe by embracing the awkwardness and vulnerability of joining a small group, saying yes to an elder's visit or the food someone wants to offer you, or asking for a mentor, or for someone to come by for coffee because you need someone to cry with.).

We lean into awkwardness and vulnerability so we can be a community that continues to grow in the way of loving one another as Jesus loved us.

When we think back to this group of disciples...we rarely hear about their talents, their greatness, what they bring. It seems they are simply a community who does life together, who learns together, who grows together and by sharing life together they are knitted together in love.

I think this is important.

We can easily get caught up in all the ways the church can help you love each other: small groups, elders, potlucks, alpha, Stephen ministers. And while churches and organized events can allow love to flow, these things are just the beginning.

Henri Nouwen says this:

“When we think about our being given to each other, what comes immediately to mind are our unique talents, those abilities to do special things especially well...however, when focusing on talents, we tend to forget that our real gift is not so much what we can do, but who we are. The real question is not “What can we offer each other?” but “who can we be for each other?” No doubt it is wonderful when we can repair something for a neighbor, give helpful advice to a friend, offer wise counsel to a colleague, bring healing to a patient, or announce good news to a [neighbor], but there is a greater gift than all of this. It is the gift of our own life that shines through all we do. As I grow older, I discover more and more that the greatest gift I have to offer is my own joy of living, my own inner peace, my own silence and solitude, my own sense of well-being. When I ask myself, who helps me most? I must answer, the one is willing to share his or her life with me.”(113)

We’re simply called to share our lives with each other in love.
That is the call of loving one another.

Who might you be able to share your life with more this year in order to grow in love through the Spirit?

We come together, in all the messiness of our differences, in the middle of some good dysfunction and some actually beautiful moments of love and care and kindness for one another.

We come centered around Jesus.

And to grow in the way of love together.
to be encouraged, challenge, held accountable to follow the way of Christ.

May we continue to love one another with a love that gives of ourselves, is generous, and takes initiative when we see a need for love and care.
God be with us in our loving.