



Mission: ...With the Love

John 15

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May the words of my mouth, the meditations of our hearts and the actions of our lives be acceptable in your sight, O God, our strength and our redeemer. Amen.

A couple of weeks ago I returned to the landscape of my youth for a weekend of wine tasting and reconnecting with old friends. It was a wonderful weekend in the south Okanagan wandering around places I can remember from the earliest layer of memory I have. We drove north from Osoyoos, past the packing house and through the acres of vineyards that used to grow apples and peaches and apricots, and the cold wind and greyness of the weather was no match for my memory of hot summers, and radiant falls. As we crossed the valley below MacIntyre Bluff where thousands of years ago, the ice and the rock has a disagreement which resulted in an amazing deep U shape in an otherwise broad valley. We drove past Carleton MacNaughton's old place between the rocks, Carlton, who when I was six was older than Moses, and who skinned a rattlesnake and mounted it on a plank for drying while my brothers and I watched in gruesome fascination. We stopped in at the old place on the lake we had built over many years with our own hands. If you dust off the leaves and the layers of spider web that have accumulated in the un-groomed corners of an outside wall, you can find pressed into the foundation of the lakeside cottage, a series of hand prints, one of which, barely the size of my palm now, has Will, 1968 scratched beside it. And the average person would look at this and imagine a moment when a little boy put his hand there, and it could bring some lovely imaginings to mind. When I look at it, I am swamped to the gulleys with events and memories and feelings, and, when I sit with them long enough, I move through nostalgia, through the wistfulness that comes with looking back, and I get to a spiritual place in my heart and mind- a place in which the maker of that place is present, the artist of my life is there, the keeper of the ebb and flow of life itself sits and welcomes me and I come into a deep awareness of the love that has brought all of us into being, the love that pervades this place and every place, the love that is so very ancient, and very wise and so very durable- the love that can overcome or perhaps outlast and endure all the misguided paths that we venture down.

In a moment I am grateful, and awe-struck, and humbled, and more than anything else, at peace, because I know that my life is part of a much bigger life, that my little piece is a branch of a much bigger, much stronger vine. And that knowing, knowing my life to be part of a much bigger life is what I believe Jesus wanted us to know when he said, "I am the vine. You are the branches. My father is the vine-dresser. Abide in, or live in or stay connected with me and you will bear fruit..." It will not be easy or gentle all the time. There will be painful pruning, heart rending thinning, but you will know the power of life flowing through you. And you will know that all of life is rooted and grounded in love.

In the busyness of life, or the loneliness of it, in the day to day experience of it we can often lose track of a deep truth which I believe is always present, the truth that is love, present at the

core of all the aches and longings, and immense joys of living. Scientists have shown incredible intelligence to uncover that the basic physical building blocks of life are not really very physical at all. Amazingly, it is energy that holds all life together. Spiritual teachers are not surprised at this, because wisdom masters like Jesus and others, have long ago called it something else. Jesus used the Greek word agape which means love and claimed it as the essential building block of life. And as long as we stay connected to the love, life will flow and unfold and grow strong and fruitful.

Have you had times when you have felt connected with a love that is beyond your words but that pervades every cell in your body and everything around you? Perhaps it was at the birth of a child or the death of a loved one. It can come to us at any time really- this realization that our life is part of a greater life, and that the greater life is called love. The realization of what is really the mystical quality to life can be experienced at any moment. It doesn't have to be a significant life event. It can happen with your hands in the dishwasher, because even the dishwasher is part of the greater life.

We are now in the fourth week of a five week series of sermons exploring the stated mission of Northwood, "Embracing our Community with the Love of Christ.." We have explored the importance of knowing our holy purpose, what we are born for, we have looked at the riskiness of claiming "embracing" as the active ingredient of our mission, we have opened up the incredibly radical challenge of seeking connection with our community, no matter who God will place in our path, and today we get to the what of our mission, the substance, the holy stuff we are seeking to exchange with others. We are seeking to embrace our community with something, to wrap each other and others in something, and we call that something "the love."

Love is such a commonly used word in today's popular language, so common in fact that it is almost meaningless. As I said to the bible study group this week, "I love Skittles!" When I look at the remaining Halloween candy in the kids bags, I love the Skittles. Really? That kind of feeling has so little in common with the love that Jesus is talking about as to need a completely different word. Love is the word used in relation to everything from sex to bathroom tissue. But when we talk about embracing our community "with the love," we are referring to a completely different reality, a spiritual reality that yes, is connected to sex and bathroom tissue, but that is a deep, all pervasive, mystical reality embedded in all things, found within all people. At that love within all things and all people calls out for our respect, our awe.

The love of our mission is universal. It inhabits every cell can be found in every person which leads us to a vigilant openness because God's love is everywhere.

The love of our mission is unconditional. It is like the rain, falling on the just and the unjust alike, which leads us to attempt to be open to all manner of people. I draw your attention to the article in the most recent United Church Observer in which you can read about churches who are attempting to embrace convicted sex offenders "with the love." What kind of conversations and what kind of behavioral agreements need to be in place in order to safely embrace a convicted pedophile "with the love" of our mission.

The love of our mission is challenging because it calls us to challenge any structure or interaction of system that robs us of our inhumanity, and diminishes this amazing love filled creation to a commodity or an object. The world is filled with the glory of God! And our love challenges us to treat it like that.

The love of our mission is paradoxical. It doesn't always make perfect sense. It is the love expressed in a willingness to endure a cross. It is the love expressed in a child born in a stable of all places. It is the magic penny kind of love which expands as it is spent, it transforms what it touches.

The love of our mission is ancient. It is the old vine, family tree of which we are a part that stretches back to the beginning of creation but that has a real lived expression in you and in me and in us. Stubborn as the grass, fresh as the morning, achingly joyous it rolls on. And when we say our mission is to embrace our community "with the love," it is not the fleeting love of popular culture that the world offers, but the ancient love which, by God's grace, rolls on. Amen