

Fearless Love
A Sermon by Louise Westfall
Fairmount Presbyterian Church
Cleveland Heights, Ohio
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Text: I John 4:7-21

Legend has it that the apostle John was the only one of Jesus' twelve disciples to die of old age (note to self: check actuarial tables for followers of Jesus). He was venerated by the early Christian community, and always invited to say a few words when they gathered for worship. Invariably he said the same thing. Leaning on the elders, he would slowly walk to the front of the church, raise his hand in blessing, and clearly intone: *Love one another*. After some time, a few of the elders began to get impatient with him and his Johnny-one-note theme, so they went to him and asked him to say something else, to open for them the breadth of the Master's teaching, to tell a parable, for example, or something...anything than the one message they'd all heard again and again, *Love one another*. The story has it that John looked upon the elders with kindness, and smilingly responded: *Love one another*.

For John, it seems, there *was* no other sermon, nothing more important to proclaim. Our text comes from a letter which bears his name, but which was probably written by a second-generation disciple. We know it was long enough after the heady days of exponential growth and joyful unity following Christ's resurrection for the nascent church to be in conflict—actually in schism over theological and ethical issues. The author writes to remind the faith community about what is essential; not simply an important principle, but the behavioral litmus test for followers of Jesus Christ. Listen for God's Word to the church today in the reading from the first letter of John, in the fourth chapter at the seventh verse. [I John 4:7-21]

Una onza de mama es un valor de ton sacerdote. An ounce of mama is worth a ton of priest. This Spanish proverb suggests

that the sermon be very short today, on a day we give particular honor to those saints who bore us (and bore with us). Brava, mothers! You deserve every expression of appreciation. Even a modest dose of unconditional love and protective caring is worth far more than a large amount of sermonizing or preacherly platitudes. But beyond reducing sermon size, I believe the saying can shed light on how to fulfill the command of our text, whether we are a mother, a priest, or neither. Love one another. It is the central demonstration of our faith, Jesus' core teaching, the heart of Christianity. Love our children; yes, and nearest and dearest (and hopefully those categories coincide MOST of the time!), but the commandment broadens the circle to include loving our neighbor, other church members, sisters and brothers in need, those we consider our enemies, and sometimes most difficult of all, loving ourselves.

No one doubts the primary importance of maternal love in the development of healthy, joyful, and purposive children. But what about loving those other folks? Is "an ounce of mama" beneficial to them too? A Christian mystic in the Middle Ages, Meister Eckhart, made the provocative suggestion that we all become mothers. That is, that we give birth to love. What good is it to me, he asked, if Mary gave birth to the Son of God fourteen hundred years ago, if I also do not give birth to the Son of God in my time and culture? We are all meant to be mothers of God. God is always needing to be born into a world that needs loving so much and so well. And God's love is completed through us when we love the people God made and redeemed.

There's almost nothing the church does that better shows the inseparability of God's love and human love than the sacrament of baptism, particularly when it involves infants, which we have celebrated again today. At the font we are reminded that God's love is for us even before we acknowledge it or return it. God calls us by name and claims us as beloved children. It is gift and grace and moves us to respond by loving this child as God does. You never smile more in

worship than when the baptized is welcomed as the newest member of God's family.

Yet Christian faith refuses to sentimentalize love. The author of this letter knew that loving one another is way harder than loving God, who dwells in unapproachable light, not to mention the fact that God never talks back, cuts you off in traffic, or develops nuclear weapons. Love will always be difficult if it is to be more than a concept and more than affectionate feelings. Recently on my Facebook wall I read another perspective on mother love: *Okay, this is it!*- she wrote—*Free to a good home, 14-year-old girl. If you're willing to take her, you can have her.* It's not easy to love, but true love is not dependent upon our feelings, or upon reciprocity of love in the other. Parents understand that their love for their children will not always be appreciated. But it's always there for them (my friend had rescinded the offer by her next status report).

An ounce of mama is worth a ton of priest. A mother's love is unconditional and active. It's also ferocious. Somehow, I hear in that proverb another side of mother love, which includes the ability to get you to do right far beyond the finger-wagging moralisms of religion or even the threat of civil law enforcement. In other words, a certain look from your mother can effect more change than anything else, because it is borne not in principle but in a passionate and persistent belief in your essential goodness and infinite value. And she's going to bring it out of you, come hell or high water! Obviously, mother love can at times be manipulative and even emotionally abusive, but at its best, nothing rivals it for behavior modification. Even more, it inspires us to become those commendable, excellent persons our mothers think we are!

Love one another. It's the law for us. But have you noticed that whenever God lays down the law, God also provides a means by which that law may be fulfilled. Not a loophole, but a safety net to catch us when we fall. We call it grace, and you know it when you want to give your disobedient child away, but you

don't. You know it within this imperfect community when divine love is experienced through laughter around a dinner table, in the softness of a prayer shawl, in the memorable taste of gluten-free communion bread, in the promise of prayers and the tangible comfort of a listening ear and outstretched hand, in adults who think your child hangs the moon, in thoughtful conversations and actions that make a difference in our city and world. You can find it in Jesus Christ, who demonstrated God's love by welcoming stranger and sinner and by laying down his own life for us all. Friends, we learn to love by the kind of love we have received. We *can* love, because God has first loved us. Princeton University professor and civil rights champion Cornel West put it well: You can learn to love your crooked neighbor with your own crooked heart because you're connected to a power and grace greater than your ego. [*Cornel West, Hope on a Tightrope, 2008, p. 46*]

It's that connection that we celebrate and seek to strengthen in worship. At the center of our community life you will not find an image of stone tablets, but a font of welcome and a cup of blessing. When we break the law of love, we break ourselves, and no one here needs further evidence of the truth of that. But the Divine Mama's love has been poured out upon us, healing and reconciling us, and bringing peace. This is how we know love, and are nourished at this table to go out and love again and anew. The circle is wide and knows no boundaries. God's love makes us fearless; God's love sets us free. AMEN.

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