

## Love Our City: What's Love Got to Do With It?

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John 15:12-17

*This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends. You are my friends if you do what I command you. I do not call you servants any longer, because the servant does not know what the master is doing, but I have called you friends, because I have made known to you everything that I have heard from my Father. You did not choose me, but I chose you. And I appointed you to go and bear fruit, fruit that will last, so that the Father will give you whatever you ask him in my name. I am giving you these commands so that you may love one another. John 15:12-17 (NRSV)*

Let's pray together: *O God, open us up, open our eyes that we might see, our ears that we might hear, and especially our hearts, God, that we might feel. Then, O Lord, open our hands that we might serve. Amen.*

So today, I want to talk about bearing fruit. Anytime I see the word fruit, what comes to my mind is a line from the movie "Mrs. Doubtfire." Do you remember the movie? In there, Robin Williams is masquerading as his children's nanny, and he sees his ex-wife's new boyfriend at someplace. He throws a lime and hits him on the back of the head. He turns around, and Mrs. Doubtfire says, "It was a run-by fruiting." I like this idea of a "fruiting" because it's a verb. I know English teachers tell me that it's not a verb... but today we're going to be talking about "fruiting."

Here's what I want to ask you. What would you say is the measure of a successful church? How do you measure a church's success? Is it the number of people in worship? We have to turn in the number of people in worship to the Annual Conference. How we're doing, the number of people in worship. Now, there are two categories – online and in-person. Is it how much money we receive or how much we give away? Is that it? Those are things we count because they're easiest, frankly. It's easy to count those things. We count how many people are in Sunday School. We count how many people are in Children's Sunday School, how many are involved in our Student Ministry, how many are in Small Groups, and how many are involved in outreach projects. We

count all those things we can count. Sometimes I think we may spend more time counting than we do doing, which is always frustrating.

But I would suggest to you... let's listen to what the Scripture says, and we're going to look at the Scripture one verse at a time. Though not in order. I want to encourage you to keep your bulletin or a Bible open so you can look as well. Verses 16 and 17 say, "I appointed you to bear fruit – fruit that will last! I am giving you these commands so that you may love one another." (John 15:16-17) I would suggest to you that the measure of a church – its success – is how much that church loves. How much the people in the church love, how much the congregation loves, that's the measure. Oh, I wish I could measure that in you all. I don't know if I can. If I could put a little sensor on your brain, on your voice, and on your hands, we could see if we are making any difference. Are the people loving more than they would if they'd not be a part of the community of faith? Because that's what bearing fruit is about.

Some years ago, actually relatively recently, we took our family to an apple orchard outside of town somewhere for a family activity of picking apples. That was going to be the activity, and we picked some apples. The trees had some apples on them, and we'd find them and put them in the bushel. Then we'd pay for them, and they're more expensive if you'd bought them at the store and you picked them yourself. But it was an experience.

And I contrasted that with once we were in New York City, and my daughter took us where she was living then in upstate New York and to the apple trees, to an apple orchard where you could pick the apples. There were these trees that had fruit just hanging down – just so full of fruit it was falling on the ground. And the contrast between the apple orchard we went to here and the apple orchard we went to in New York was so dramatic. They both had the same number of trees. The trees were basically the same size. But one was bearing incredible fruit, and one was not. It isn't how many trees we have in the sanctuary; it's how much fruit we bear. And this is my command, that you love one another.

For those of you who are management-minded, let me give you a different image. If you are trained in Six Sigma management, they use a process called IPO – Input Process Output. So input is what comes into the system, then something happens in the system, and then it puts something out of the system. So, there's an input, there's a process, and an output. Sometimes, you call the process through-puts. For example, in the Army, the input might be recruits, the process might be

boot camp and the output would hopefully be soldiers. So, it comes in, there's a process, it goes out.

What we do in the church is count the process, not the output. Frankly, it's because we can't count the output; it's hard to count how much love you share. But we count things like Bible Study, and we encourage you to be in prayer. We have these habits we want you to practice, and they're all ways to generate an output of fruit, an output of love.

To go back to the image of fruit, in John 15, which is what we're reading from right now. How does it begin right now? "I am the vine; you are the branches." He says to his disciples. "I am the vine; you are the branches, and any branch that doesn't bear fruit we'll cut off and throw into the fire." Whoo! The idea is that Christ is the vine, we are the branches, and we are to produce the fruit of love.

So when we've been talking in this sermon series about how to love our city, we've been talking about how to produce fruit. How can we go about the business of being more fruitful in our work? So, two weeks ago, we talked about how we can make a difference in our city in the sense of addressing the issues and the difficulties that people are struggling with in our city. So, if you go out into the Commons, you can see a place where people have put little Post-It notes on the board of all the things they're doing to help make a difference. To work at CCSC Food Pantry, or one says, "I'm on the board of Kids' Meals." Another says, "I work in the Main Street Ministries Garden." Someone says, "I support the Nick Finnegan Counseling Center." Someone says, "I'm an attorney for the needy." There are all sorts of ways that you're out trying to make a difference in the world, really being the church in tangible ways, making a difference, and loving our city.

And last week we talked about how you can see individual people you can help. Or, no, individual people you can love. Because it's not just about helping, it's about loving. How can I look outside my scope of usual practice and see people who I could reach out to and love in the name of Christ? The person who's lonely and just needs a friend and someone suggested, "I'm going to invite them to go on a walk with me." We can move beyond that.

Well, today I want to talk about our *especially* people. What I call the "especially" people we need to love. When I was in seminary, our ethics professor helped me understand this. He said, "Yes, everybody is a child of God, and you have a covenant, a relationship with those people that you are your brother's keeper. There is that sense in that you care about them. But you have special covenants that you have an increased and special responsibility to. If I get married to someone, I

now have a special responsibility to that person that is beyond my responsibility to everyone in the world. If I'm an employee of an organization, I have a special responsibility to that organization. If I join a church, I have a special responsibility."

So, like Paul writes in Galatians, he says, "If at all possible do good to all." This is Galatians 6:10. "If at all possible, do good to all, especially those to those who belong to the household of faith." We have a special responsibility to one another.

Paul writes to Timothy, and he says, "Everyone should be responsible for taking care of their own family, their own relatives," I think he actually says, "providing for." "Everyone is responsible for providing for their own family, and not to do so makes you worse than an unbeliever." You have this responsibility, a special responsibility to the people with whom you have a special covenant. What I want us to think about today is how do we love our city especially them, including them.

I want us to look today at this next part of the Scripture. It's at the beginning of verse 15. Jesus says, in John, "I do not call you servants any longer, because the servant does not know what the master is doing, but I have called you friends." (John 15:15a). There's a movement from being a servant to being a friend. From being in a transactional relationship where my job is to help when I am to serve when I am to produce into a relational mode. When I really want to love you.

Let's talk about our workplace, for example. Drew Scoggins is here with us today. He blushes as he sits there. Drew is our Pastoral Intern, and he does a lot of things. He runs an energy business, and a successful energy business he founded years ago. He's finishing his seminary, and he's actually doing his Pastoral Internship here, so he'll be done in May. Will have finished his Master of Divinity degree and wants to be a deacon in the church – the United Methodist Church. And he and his brilliant wife Kelly run a coffee shop called Bitty and Beau's, and it's over in Rice Village, and it's a for-profit coffee shop. It employs people with intellectual or developmental disabilities.

So, what he's doing for us is leading our working faith initiative. Working faith is our way of talking to people to begin to think about how we take faith into our workplace. How do we actually go out there and make a difference for Christ in the places that we work? And you know I think sometimes we just think that it's about praying with our neighbor, which it could be with our colleague, it could be that—or leaving the Bible on your desk. It sure is a lot more than that. How do you live in a way that is faithful in your workplace?

Here's how all this comes together. If you go to Bitty and Beau's it says on the wall their mission statement, "Changing the way people see other people." I love that. Changing the way people see other people. Now, for them, it's how you see people with intellectual or developmental disabilities, but I think it's much broader than that. Do we see people, let's say, in our workplace in a transactional way? What can they do for me? How can they help me? What can they produce? Will they pull their weight? Will they do their part? Or will we see them as people to be loved? It's a big difference. And, of course, we need to all work toward something together. I'm not saying one is a bad thing. I'm just saying that there's more to it than just saying how we are working together on our mission. It's about how I see you as a human being that can be loved. That can be cared for. That has been gifted by God, as someone to be loved. When we make that switch in our minds, it makes all the difference.

What about even at our home? I'm going to give you the bad news – though it's probably not bad news for many of us because we're past the point. You get married and the satisfaction in marriage, this is statistics, the satisfaction in marriage is pretty high soon after you get married. You have children, and it begins to plummet. Your satisfaction in marriage begins to plummet. And slowly, the more children you have, the lower it goes. And you go along. And when the children leave home, it goes back up again. It isn't that there's anything wrong with children; it's that there's so much to be done. And so, what happens is that your marriage becomes transactional. What are you going to do? What am I going to do? How are we going to get the kids where they need to be? Who's going to do the dishes? We've got lots of things to get accomplished. It's also at a time generally in our work life where we're trying to really excel and achieve. So, there's all of that going on. You become transactional.

I said to one of my daughters last night that when you start counting who changes the cat litter more you're getting in trouble. There's that sense of we're just getting by and we're trying to do this together, but we're not looking at each other. We're not relating to each other. We're not seeing one another as someone to be loved, but as someone who can help me get this mission of raising family done.

Both of them are important, but when we choose to love. I mean, how many times have I preached love to you all and gone home and snapped at my wife? How many times have I preached about love and then treated a colleague with disdain or ignored something? We begin to feel to not realize the impact we can make on those closest to us.

That move from transactional to relational from using people to loving them is what Jesus is talking about is how we love one another bearing fruit.

The very first verse says, “No one has greater love than this, to lay down one’s life for one’s friends.” (John 15:13). Loving involves effort and often pain, even with the people closest to you. It takes work. It takes sacrifice. You have to decide I’m going to work at this. And this relationship and work at loving someone.

When I was a freshman in high school, my father – Dad, you’re probably watching, worshipping with us from California – Hi, Dad! Hi, Tommy, shout out to them. He gave me this book when I was a freshman in high school, *The Little Prince*. It was clearly his before it was mine because he’s written all these phone numbers in it. He writes on the inside, “I hope you enjoy this book as much as I have. Keep the Little Prince’s imagination and clear vision, and you’ll see a world few people see. Christmas, 1973.” This is a book about how to love. It doesn’t include the word love in it once. But it’s about how to love. It’s a fable about a little prince who wanders around and runs into people. And he runs into a fox, and he tames this fox. That’s an important piece of the picture. But as he’s wandering back home, he has a rose that he’s worried about. A rose that he loved and cared about: and he runs across all these other roses. I’m going to read out of this since it’s the print is bigger. “The little prince went back to look at the roses again. ‘You’re not at all like my rose. You’re nothing at all yet,’ he told them. ‘No one has tamed you, and you haven’t tamed you, and you haven’t tamed anyone. You’re the way my fox was. He was just a fox like a hundred thousand others. But I’ve made him my friend, and now he’s the only fox in all the world.’ And the roses were humbled.”

He goes on to talk to them: “One couldn’t die for you. Of course, an ordinary passerby would think my rose looked just like you. But my rose, all on her own, is more important than all of you together since she’s the one I’ve watered. Since she’s the one I put under glass. Since she’s the one I sheltered behind a screen. Since she’s the one for whom I killed the caterpillars (except the two or three for butterflies) She’s the one I listened to when she complained, or when she boasted, or even sometimes when she said nothing at all. Since she’s my rose.”

This is the one I sacrificed for. This is the one I give of myself for. This is the one I have a special covenant for and I will even die for.

Now, it’s amazing that Jesus has said that he’d die for us, every one of us. To love beginning with those closest to us means to sacrifice.

All right, there's one last piece I want you to hear, and it may be the most crucial one I want us to understand. He says, "I have called you friends because I have made known to you everything that I have heard from my Father." (John 15:15b). So the source of our love is God. In other words, that's where that love we have to share with those closest to us, those in the next level out, those who we may not even see their faces. But we're trying to make a difference in their lives in the city. That love doesn't begin with us. We don't create it in our hearts. We don't receive it so much from others; it is a gift of God that comes into us. We only have that love because God loved us first. And when we realize that there is an unending source of that love poured into us that the more we are able to pour it out sacrificially, relationally, the more we experience it being poured into us. Because that's the source of all of it.

So, here's what I invite you to do. Love our city. Love those closest to you. Love those the next level out. Love those that we may not even see. As the great James Taylor says, "Shower the people you love with love; show them the way that you feel." Scripture tells us that we have been put here in this city to love it. "Seek the welfare of the city, to which I have sent you," says God through the prophet Jeremiah "For in its welfare, you will find your welfare."

Go love our city.

*Gracious God, what a gift your love for us is, and we don't want to hoard it. So, give us the courage, the perseverance, the resilience to love those closest to us. Those especially people around us. To open our eyes to see the people just beyond them whom we may not know but we could come to know and love. And then, God, even help us to reach out to the city around us and try to make a tangible difference. So that everyone would look at the people who follow your Son Jesus and say, "Wow, look how they love!" In the name of Christ, we pray. Amen.*