

Call to Worship

As we begin our worship these words are for thinking: 'What must I do so that Jesus will call me his friend? Shall we come to church every Sunday and put lots of money in the plate? Will he be pleased if I go out fishing and bring in hundreds of new members? Shall we show how sorry we are for the past and try to do better in future? No! He has told us that we are his friends, and that he loves us, no matter what. All he asks is that we let his love transform us; that we love one another.'

Hymn – Praise, my soul, the King of heaven,

Prayer of Adoration & Praise

We clear our heads, we still our hearts and we come before God in prayer, let us pray.

Lord of inclusive love, you make it so that nobody is left out. No person is excluded from the invitation to live within the circle of your love.

Though much of the life we know is about the separation between inner circle and outer— where some are poorer, hungrier, colder, sicker and made to feel more restricted than others— yours is a Kingdom where love is unconditional, and the potential within the created life is of equal possibility.

Today we worship you, the God who is Three-In-One, one person, who calls us to create a unity and oneness in the family of creation, where all are valued.

God, we confess that as humanity, we have created divisions and segregation between the peoples of the earth, though history and in the present.

We have not listened to your eternal story from creation to redemption, and have not grasped, nor fostered, inclusive and mutual love in the way we should have.

We confess that sometimes we have been guilty of creating such comforts and security for ourselves as individuals or nations, that we have taken our eye off what it means to be people who look out for one another.

As people who admit to such failure, today we seek to be challenged to do better. Accepting of your indefatigable grace and mercy, we are humbled and left with such a gratitude, that we are ready to mend our ways and be more ready to live by the

example of your son, who taught us about the true meaning of friendship, and so discover what it takes to be completely at one with you and all your people.

For all this we ask in Jesus' name, who taught us when we pray together to say; Our Father in Heaven, hallowed be your name, your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Give us today our daily bread. Forgive us our sins as we forgive others that sin against us. Save us from the time of trial and deliver us from evil. For the kingdom, the power and the glory are yours, now and forever. Amen.

Readings: John 15: 9 - 17

⁹ I love you just as the Father loves me; remain in my love. ¹⁰ If you obey my commands, you will remain in my love, just as I have obeyed my Father's commands and remain in his love.

¹¹ "I have told you this so that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete. ¹² My commandment is this: love one another, just as I love you. ¹³ The greatest love you can have for your friends is to give your life for them. ¹⁴ And you are my friends if you do what I command you. ¹⁵ I do not call you servants any longer, because servants do not know what their master is doing. Instead, I call you friends, because I have told you everything I heard from my Father. ¹⁶ You did not choose me; I chose you and appointed you to go and bear much fruit, the kind of fruit that endures. And so the Father will give you whatever you ask of him in my name. ¹⁷ This, then, is what I command you: love one another.

Hymn – From Life's beginning (Let Praise Re-sound)

Sermon – 'Love one another'

There was once a group of market researchers who posed the following question to a group of American 4- to 8-year-old children: 'What does love mean?' The answers they got were broader and deeper than anyone could have imagined. I wonder, what do you think of their answers:

'When someone loves you, the way they say your name is different. You know that your name is safe in their mouth.' Billy – age 4

'Love is when a girl puts on perfume and a boy puts on shaving cologne and they go out and smell each other.' Karl – age 5

'Love is when you go out to eat and give somebody most of your French fries without making them give you any of theirs.' Chrissy – age 6

'Love is what makes you smile when you are tired.' Terri – age 4

'Love is what's in the room with you at Christmas if you stop opening presents and listen.' Bobby – age 5

'Love is like a little old woman and a little old man who are still friends even after they know each other so well.' Tommy – age 6

'My Mommy loves me more than anybody. You don't see anyone else kissing me to sleep at night.' Claire – age 5

'Love is when Mommy sees Daddy smelly and sweaty and still says he is handsomer than Robert Redford.' Chris – age 8

'I know my older sister loves me because she gives me all her old clothes and has to go out and buy new one.' Lauren – age 4

'You really shouldn't say 'I love you' unless you mean it. But if you mean it, you should say it a lot. People forget.' Jessica – age 8

'If you want to learn to love better, you should start with a friend whom you hate.' Nikki – age 6

'There are two kinds of love. Our love. God's love. But God makes both kinds of them.' Jenny – age 4.¹

As we turn to today's Gospel reading, we pick up immediately from where we left off last week, when Jesus was describing God as the vine and us as the branches. Jesus was telling us that we should abide in, or be at home in God, and let God abide in us.

Today we listen as Jesus describes in more detail what this means. He explains how we go about getting this abiding love – *'If you obey my commands, you will remain in my love, just as I have obeyed my Father's commands and remain in his love.'* To

¹ www.cybersalt.org

ensure His listeners and us know exactly which commands Jesus is talking about he goes on to say; ¹² *My commandment is this: love one another, just as I love you.* ¹³ *The greatest love you can have for your friends is to give your life for them.* ¹⁴ *And you are my friends if you do what I command you...* ¹⁷ *This, then, is what I command you: love one another.'*

Which leaves me wondering, how can we show love to one another. Is it as simple as the children said in their answers to the market researchers? For some of us it might be that we are there for others in their time of greatest need. For some of us it might be sharing the work that has to be done in our homes, at our work, or within the church and for others it may be that they know someone loves them, when a friend smiles warmly at them.

Let us face it – love is a ‘hazy’ subject and we good Scottish Presbyterians are not often particularly good at figuring out how we can show it. Yet, Jesus is clear with His definition. He plainly ties together love and obedience to His commandments. He tells us how He wants us to love Him, and He tells us how He loves us. Jesus says, *‘If you obey my commands, you will remain in my love... My commandment is this: love one another, just as I love you... And you are my friends if you do what I command you.’*

It sounds, very much, like Jesus is saying our relationship with Him is contingent on our following His commandments. In other words, Jesus says we will all get along fine, as long, as we do what He says. *‘And you are my friends if you do what I command you.’* In any other situation, we would call this an unhealthy relationship. Surely love does not work this way! How can love ‘work’ if one person is in control? Our independent natures ‘bristle’ at the thought. No-one can make us love... you cannot command love, can you? Yet, there it is in verse 17: *‘This, then, is what I command you: love one another.’*

Perhaps, at this point, some perspective is in order. Jesus lived and taught in a day when being a faithful person meant following the laws of the Torah. The laws that had bound together the community from generation to generation. The people Jesus lived among were also people who lived in a very highly structured society, where masters and slaves and every status level in between lived according to rules and customs that governed their behaviour.

As for commandments – the Teachers of the Law counted over six hundred commandments that faithful Jews were meant to follow. So, Jesus comes along, as

one more person who talks about commandments. Yet is he talking about the same old commandments? No – instead, Jesus’ idea of making rules is to require love. The people are command to love.

Today, as we listen to this service, I want to suggest that we are not so different from the Jews that Jesus was teaching that day. We just think we are! We too, live our lives surrounded by rules. We can live by laws and grudgingly but dutifully obey household rules, school rules, rules at work, rules for the order of the church, rules for society, national rules and rules for the international community.

We manage to live under so much law – so many commandments. Really, to be commanded to love – indeed, how can we find this burdensome? If we obey this command, this one – to love – how many of those other rules would we need? And what is more, we are bring commanded by Jesus to do the very thing we most want to have.

Surely, everyone wants to be loved. Surely, everyone longs to be loved. The Rev. Edward Markquart puts it like this: ‘It’s about love, love, love. From the moment you are born until the moment you die; and every second and every minute and every hour and every day and every month and every year and every decade, the purpose of life is God giving you and me the time to learn how to love, as God loves. The purpose of time, of every moment and every day and every year is that God is teaching us what it means to be a truly loving people. That is what it has always been about. God commands us to love one another in these ways.

It is like God commanding fish to swim. It is like commanding birds to fly. It is like God commanding daffodils to be beautiful. When God commands is to love as God loves, God us simply commanding us to be the kind of people that we were created to be in the first place. We were created in the image of God; we are like God; and God is love.’²

Therefore, Jesus’ commandments could never be called burdensome. Jesus, in this reading, is talking about something more than that. In verse 11, He says; *‘I have told you this so that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete.’* I wonder, have you ever experienced joy that is complete? Think over your life – think about the times in your life when you have felt the most sheer, unblemished, undiluted joy.

² www.sermonsfromseattle.com/series_b_its_about_love_love_love.htm

If I were a betting man, I would guess that the joyful experience you are thinking of also has something to do with an experience of love, that our experiences of joy are never solely just about us but always have something to do with the relationships in our lives.

When I was younger, there was a hymn that was often sung in our church, that has a chorus which contains these words: 'And they'll know we are Christians by our love, by our love; yes they'll know we are Christians by our love.'³ Over the years, these words began to 'strike home' and it occurred to me how special life would be if these words were a reality. Sadly, most of the time, they are not. Although we 'warm' to everything that Jesus said about loving others – even our enemies – and although we want to love more than anything, often, we are not that good at it. If we are totally honest, the truth is we find it hard to *like* some people, let alone *love* them.

We cannot change that by ourselves, of course. No amount of effort on our part can make us feel something we do not, but when we open our lives to God's Grace, we catch a glimpse of what love is 'really' about. None of deserve that love, and yet God glimpses in each of us something that is special – something that is precious enough to die for. If God can see that in us, surely, as Christian Aid week begins, we can see it in others.

Jesus speaks to us of commandments, not to burden us, but to free us, because He wants us to have this joy. Joy – not just in fleeting moments, but as a regular part of our living. Jesus said, '*I have told you this so that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete.*' So, let us be followers of the rules and of all the rules we are bound by, of all you can choose to follow, why not choose obedience to the one commandment that promises everything in exchange for your obedience. Let us love, and be loved, and love and be loved.

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Hymn – Jesus is Lord (The cry that echoes through creation)

Video – Christian Aid Week 2021

³ Written by Peter Schloter

A woman sings a deep, joyful tune. Her song lifts the spirits of the other women on the farm. This is Florence. She is full of life, love and laughter. The women in her farming group look up to her. She's courageous, kind – a survivor. A few years ago, her husband died, leaving her a widow. At that time, she had no water to grow crops. Her children were hungry. She had to walk for hours on a dangerous journey to collect water. 'Life was miserable,' she told us.

Florence could easily have been defeated. But Florence is a fighter, and she shows the women in her farming group that they can be fighters, too. Next to her farm, Florence is proud to show us something remarkable – a dam, full of freshwater. It's thanks to Christian Aid Week donations like yours that Florence and her community have built this water dam, with the help of our partner ADSE, just a short walk away from her village.

With this dam, Florence can grow tomatoes, onions and chillies on her farm. With this dam, her children can eat healthy, nutritious vegetables. It's her source of life and joy. Florence also uses the water from the dam to keep honey bees. She sells the rich, golden honey for cash at the market. Now, Florence is reaping a good life for herself and her family. This is all thanks to generous people like you, who have helped provide a dam close to her home.

'I have been sustained by the earth dam. My life has changed. I am very happy. You can see in my face: my face is shining. I have strength and power.' You can see Florence's strength and power as she hauls heavy buckets to water her crops. You can see her strength and power as she digs up the fresh vegetables she has grown. You can see her strength and power as she takes climate justice into her hands.

Florence is generous, and she knows other people are struggling to cope with the drought. 'There is a village nearby – they don't have an earth dam. They travel for a long way to come to this water point. They are suffering.' 'I am thankful to people who have donated to build this earth dam. I am praying God will increase their giving. 'Give today and help more people like Florence stop this climate crisis.

Sadly, millions of people in Kenya are desperately struggling to survive the drought. It's so severe that it was declared a national emergency. You can help another community build a dam. Many more people will have the water they need to sustain their families. Please give generously and help more people like Florence to thrive.

Prayer for Ourselves and Others

We unite our hearts again in prayer, let us pray.

Lord of love, you call us to love all people in the way you love us. Today we first pause to recognise what your love for us looks like. It is like nothing else. So often we fail, so often we mess up— yet you are there with unconditional love. Do we cherish this love you extend to us? Do we really acknowledge it with the gratitude we should? We take time to know your love for us.

Silence

Lord of love we are now ready. Ready to take what we know about our inclusion in your circle of love, that we can extend our vision outwards and away from ourselves, focussing instead on the world around us, the people we live in community with, and the issues of the world itself.

We pray for those who feel excluded, left out, for those who find society a place where it is easy to feel excluded from what others might take for granted. We pray for those who are made to feel, not just servants of others— at the beck-and-call of people around them— but indeed, slaves to powerful masters who create a real experience of fear and distress. We take time to know your love for them.

Silence

We pray for those who feel unloved. Because of knowing little human love and affirmation in their life, we recognise how hard it must be for some to have any genuine sense of being loved by you. We take time to know your love for them.

Silence

Today, across the world, and running deep into our communities, may your love be more widely known and more broadly shared. Let such a peace envelop your people, that any desire to exclude others will be anathema, for all will seek to welcome and befriend one another. Amen

Hymn – Love divine, all loves excelling.

Benediction

Friends, you are loved. Jesus loves you and calls on us to love others. Let us go in peace to do just that...So, as we go, may the Blessing of God Almighty, Father, Son and Spirit, rest upon you and all whom you love, this day and forevermore. Amen.

Closing Song –