

*How We Live Love - Based on John 15:9-17
Aspen Community UMC
May 17, 2009*

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From the beginning of the Christian Church there has been a religion about Jesus that is often different from the religion of Jesus. The religion of Jesus has a different approach to love. We read that today. It is an approach to love that enlarges our experience of life and expands our life energies.

How do we live love?

How do we live this way that Jesus is telling his disciples to do?

We really get down to the core of his teaching in these statements.

As a way to try to get at

how we might live this way –

I want to say a few things about theology.

Theology is talk about God – thinking about God –

speculating what God is or is not.

Theology is basically opinions that have been set forth –

by individual scholars – or by committees.

Theologians attempt to articulate what we might believe –

or in the case of the early church - what we should believe.

Basically – theology is opinion –

but it helps us shape our thinking about the world in which we live.

Religion comes from theology. Religion is partly what we believe – or theology.

But religion is more. Religion is also what we do – how we live.

We worship together as an expression of our beliefs -

coming together to pray, to sing, to learn.

We share our lives in response to what we believe about God's purposes for us.

We believe God is in relationship to us –

and that means our relationships with one another are also important.

We try to discover what God is inviting us into.

Because – we want our lives to be as full – as meaningful as they can be.



There are some theologies that came about very early in church history -

that were an attempt to describe what happened in Jesus

and how he fit into the ways people already understood God.

These theologies were expressed in the form of creeds and formulas

that people were expected to ascribe to or believe in -

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to demonstrate that they were Christian.

Things like the Apostles Creed or the Nicene Creed and even the concept of the Trinity.

I am calling these things religion about Jesus.

They were not the religion of Jesus – not what he believed – for he never heard of them.

Our reading today is not about Jesus.

Our reading today is the religion of Jesus.

The religion of Jesus is what he talked about with people.

Jesus talked about – for one thing – how to live and how to love.

He talked about – how to treat one another.

He talked about – how you can be whole – here and now -
more connected to the Father - as he called God.

The religion of Jesus -

is really about how to be in touch with – the dynamic source of life.

It is about love - not our romanticized notions of love -

that has a lot to do with our emotions -

but love as a way of action in the world – a way to live.

It's love as a way to pull us out of the confines of our own natures -

and even out of conventional religion and culture and politics -

that has historically led us to hate those who are different –

in ethnicity or sexual orientation or economic status or

because of mental illness or religion or national origin -

at different times and places in history.

Our own natures – often influenced by culture and politics -

can result in national leaders who justify torture

- an example that is in the news lately -

when it clearly is not a value expressed by our nation.

Such a thing would never be a part of the way Jesus would have us live.

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Today we hear Jesus talk about love.
We hear the more profound insight – about how to live – how to treat one another
how to find peace - and live a life of great depth and purpose.

There is a story – an old story
that appears in the *Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson* -
probably written around the 8th century.
It's about experiences in life that can crack open something within us –
and let us love more fully and more openly.

It's a story about a monk who lived an austere life in a monastery in France -
and had very definite ideas about what constituted a faithful life.

A monk, Friar Bernard, lamented in his cell on Mount Cenis, the crimes of mankind.
Rising one morning before daybreak from his bed of moss and dry leaves,
he gnawed his roots and berries and drank of the spring -
and set forth to go to Rome –
to reform the corrupt people there.

On his way he encountered many travelers who greeted him courteously.
And the cabins of peasants – and the castles of lords – supplied his few wants.
When he came at last to Rome, he met many families who were actually rich.

And on the first day he saw and talked to mothers with babes.
They told him how much love they had for their children -
and how they were perplexed in their daily walk -
lest they should fail in their duty to them.

"What!" he said, "and this on rich embroidered carpets,
on marble floors - surrounded by expensive sculpture -
and carved wood - rich pictures - and piles of books around you?"

"You're rich Roman pagans – not even Christians!
How can you be good people?"

"Look at our pictures, and books," they said,
"and we will tell you, good Brother, how we spent last evening."

"These books are full of stories of godly children and holy families
and sacrifices made in old or in recent times -
by great and not mean persons.

And last evening - our families were all gathered together -
and our husbands and brothers spoke sadly
on what we could save and give to others in the hard times."

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"Does your monastery want gifts? Let us share with you."

Then Friar Bernard went home
with other thoughts than he had brought, saying,
"Their way of life is wrong – they are not even poor,
and they are not Christians!

Yet these Romans, whom I prayed God to destroy, are loving people.
What can I do?"

That's the story.



Well, Friar Bernard has a couple of choices.

He can try to forget what he has just seen and felt -
and return to his comfortable beliefs.

Or - he can realize that his beliefs are too small to hold life -
or even to serve it in a way that is not dangerous to others.¹



Jesus' words in the gospel today are about this very thing.

To aspire to the kind of love Jesus is asking us to do -
(and it is something we do – not just something we believe) -
we are to enlarge our circle of love.

It may be to give up some assumptions about who is loveable.

Friar Bernard would not have seen Romans to be worth his love.
Friar Bernard needed to let down some barriers he had in his mind -
so he could be more open to the world -
and the surprises that it had for him.

For us to abide in the love of Jesus is for us to enlarge our hearts.
When that happens we love people and causes outside of ourselves -
because we are enlarged to include them.

Sometimes we call it *transformation*.

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When it happens we invest ourselves in relationships
and causes that transcend us.

When we stay too much within our own selves or our small group -
our life energies actually shrink. They diminish.

We weaken our life force when we stay too centered on ourselves.

Jesus is asking his disciples – and us to have the faith and courage to choose things
that lead us toward life – in a bigger way.

I am calling it *letting love get lived*.

The religion of Jesus' time told him not to love any number of people.

He said "no" to that kind of religion.

And Friar Bernard – on his way to save the wretched Romans -
got a chance to abide in a bigger love –

and maybe say "no" to a kind of religion that had limited him.

He was given the chance to *let love get lived* in a bigger way.

So – let's think of our own lives –

and give some prayer time to how we all might better *let love live* -

give it fuller breadth and fuller expression -

right where we are and who we are -

so that our life energies expand beyond what they may be now.

As for Friar Bernard – there are many stories like his.

You may have one of your own by now.

Jesus is telling his disciples something very important for them – and for us.

It's about how to live out the love -

that comes to us first from God -

and is to be shared with the world.

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¹ This discussion is adapted from D Loehr. Frist Unitarian Universalist Church, Austin, Texas 2006.