

“What Is Love?” - May 10, 2015

John 15:9-17; 1 John 5:1-6

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Both of today’s scripture lessons talk about love. The writings of John have a tendency to be rather poetic and beautiful to read. Yet sometimes the meaning gets lost in the wordiness. As I have said before, when John talks about love, he doesn’t mean an emotion or feeling; love is an action. And when Jesus talks about love, love is a way of life for a disciple; it is a commandment. Love is about doing, not feeling. When we choose to follow Jesus, we are choosing to embark on a lifelong journey of growing in love – love the action, not love the feeling. If we were to rely simply on feeling, we wouldn’t get anywhere. Active love requires commitment, effort and follow-through.

Last weekend I was in Oklahoma with family. I officiated the wedding service for my cousin Vicky and her fiancé Steven. That they were in love was quite evident by how they looked at one another and their carefree attitudes that life was good and always would be. Not to burst the sticky-sweet emotional bubble in which they both joyfully resided, in my homily to them, I laid out a plan of love in action for their life together. Love not based on emotion but in how they treated one another.

The love that John talks about in his gospel and letters, and the love that Jesus commands his disciples to live out, is really about how we relate to one another. How we live in our relationships. Not just with family. Not just with friends. Now just within our local or church community. But in our relationships with everyone. It’s about how we relate to every other person on this earth.

The tricky part is, that every relationship that we have has some feeling attached to it. Every time we meet a person or hear about a person, we feel something. When the feeling is positive it is easy to act in loving ways toward that person. When the feelings are neutral or apathetic, loving action becomes a tad more difficult. When the feelings are negative, acting in love is a much more an arduous task. The commandment to love insists - action must trump feeling. Withholding love or avoiding love are not options.

Let me say that again. Withholding love or avoiding love are not options. For instance – have you ever avoided getting involved with something because you felt like it didn’t pertain to you? Not my business. Not my concern. Not my issue. I didn’t cause the problem, so why should I try to fix it? It doesn’t apply to me, so I don’t care. Now, I’m not talking about getting up in someone’s business. I’m talking about issues of justice – when the rights of others are being suppressed. The commandment to love goes beyond the concerns of our

own little world of existence. It reaches out to the greater world, to every person loved by God.

So as you start to see the bigger picture and the implications of this commandment to love, you realize it's not a simple task. It's not something we can ever complete and then move on to something else. It is a continual way of being – something we work at every day. And likely, it's something we fail at every day. But friends, failure doesn't mean we quit trying. We acknowledge our mistake and get right back to it.

As I was trying to figure out what to say to my cousin Vicky and her fiancé at their wedding, I thought about this journey of showing love in action. Any of you who are in or have been in a close relationship understand that relationships don't just happen. They take work. Hard work.

Planning for their service, I came across a reading that I'd like to share with you today. This is an excerpt from a beloved children's story, *The Velveteen Rabbit*, by Margery Williams. This is a story about a young, stuffed animal who finds himself in a nursery full of toys and wonders what it means to be REAL.

"What is REAL?" asked the Rabbit one day, when they were lying side by side near the nursery fender, before Nana came to tidy the room. "Does it mean having things that buzz inside you and a stick-out handle?"

"Real isn't how you are made," said the Skin Horse. "It's a thing that happens to you. When a child loves you for a long, long time, not just to play with, but REALLY loves you, then you become Real."

"Does it hurt?" asked the Rabbit.

"Sometimes," said the Skin Horse, for he was always truthful. "When you are Real you don't mind being hurt."

"Does it happen all at once, like being wound up," he asked, "or bit by bit?"

"It doesn't happen all at once," said the Skin Horse. "You become. It takes a long time. That's why it doesn't happen often to people who break easily, or have sharp edges, or who have to be carefully kept. Generally, by the time you are Real, most of your hair has been loved off, and your eyes drop out and you get loose in the joints and very shabby. But these things

don't matter at all, because once you are Real you can't be ugly, except to people who don't understand."

"I suppose you are real?" said the Rabbit. And then he wished he had not said it, for he thought the Skin Horse might be sensitive. But the Skin Horse only smiled.

Friends, we are on a journey together toward becoming REAL – toward experiencing the life of wholeness that God desires for each and every one of us. God started us on this journey by first loving us and then claiming us in our baptism. In our promise to follow Jesus Christ and live lives of discipleship to him, we have committed ourselves to living lives of love in action. And oh, what a journey it is!