

CALLED TO LOVE
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Fifth Sunday of Easter
Shepherdstown Presbyterian Church

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There's a lot of *love* in the lesson from I John for today. And that made me think of my father who was not a big fan of love.

My father's name was Michael, but nearly everyone called him Mickey. He was renown in and around Youngstown, Ohio as a semi-professional baseball player—a centerfield slugger like Mickey Mantle. When I was growing up, people told me often about my father's baseball prowess.

My father was the grandson of German immigrants and the son of a western Pennsylvania coalminer, who died from a mining accident. My father worked outdoors his entire adult life in blistering heat and freezing cold as a brakeman on the P&LE Railroad. On many a day after that job, he'd work several more hours painting houses to make a little extra money in order to put me through Wheaton College—even though he objected to the word “liberal” in my liberal arts education.

So when I came home from college the summer of 1967, with long hair, a beard and *Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band* under my arm, flashing the peace sign and saying, “love is all you need,” my father grimaced. “Yeah, yeah, yeah,” he'd say, “all you need is LUV,” which he took to mean kissy face sentimentality without commitment or work or faith in Jesus Christ as your personal Lord and savior.

My dad was a born-again Christian and a self-taught master of the Bible in a fundamentalist sort of way. And being the son of a fundamentalist, I too knew the Bible pretty well, but not well enough to let it make me kind or gracious.

So against his mocking of *LUV*, I once spat back at him his favorite Bible author, the apostle Paul, specifically, the so-called “love chapter,” I Corinthians 13. Well, dad, I said, what about this from the Apostle Paul: *now abideth faith, hope and love and the greatest of these is LUV.*

He let that pass. He didn't take the bait.

That summer during his two vacation weeks, he and I painted a large, two and half story house owned by an elderly woman, a widow of a Ford Motor Company executive. It took a long time because the house was large and because my dad insisted on perfection: scrape the old paint off, then wire brush the whole house, then dry brush the whole house, then prime, and finally two coats of oil based paint. The finished house looked beautiful.

He paid me my wages and then I asked how much he had made on that long, hot, grueling job. He said he'd made a couple hundred dollars. I was shocked. *What?! Just a couple hundred?! You should have gotten a thousand or more!*

"She's a widow," my dad said, "and the Bible says we are to be kind to orphans and widows."

"But she's a *millionaire* widow," I retorted.

My dad took the Bible literally. If only I could have taught him that "orphans and widows" are biblical *metaphors* for *poor and neglected people in general*, we could have made a whole lot more money that summer.

My father wasn't big on love but he was big on living by the Bible and doing right by people whether he loved them or not. I mean, really, *what's love got to do with it?*

My dad worked on the railroad all his working days and painted houses on the side, but his *vocation*—although he'd never put it this way—*was to love others*. Through Christ he had somehow heard the call to love others.

The lesson this morning from I John has the word "love" in it more than a few times. This little letter is attributed to the author of the Gospel by that name. It was said of John that in his final years while living in Ephesus his own disciples carried his frail body on a stretcher through the streets. And from that stretcher John would slowly wave his hand and say softly over and over: "My children, love one another. Love one another."

As I read an excerpt from the first lesson for today I invite you to count the number of times you hear *love* in one form or another.

Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God; everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love. In this is love, not that we loved God but that God loved us. Beloved, since God loved us so much, we ought to love one another. No one has ever seen God; if we love one another, God lives in us, and God's love is perfected in us. So we have known and believe the love that God has for us. God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them. There is no fear in love; perfect love casts out fear. We love because God first loved us. Those who say, "I love God," and hate their brothers or sisters, are liars; for those who do not love a brother or sister whom they have seen, cannot love God whom they have not seen. The commandment we have from God is this: those who love God must love their brothers and sisters also. (1 John 4:7-21)

So how many times did you hear *love* in that?

Those who love God must love their brothers and sisters. *Must love!* So, yes, *love is all you need*. But clearly *love is more than a feeling* otherwise it could not be commanded. You *must* love whether you feel like it or not.

And just when you think loving your own brothers and sisters might be slightly possible, along comes Jesus (thank-you-very-much) calling us into a larger and larger reconstituted family. And that brings us to the other lesson for today (Acts 8:26-40) in which Philip ends up embracing an Ethiopian eunuch as a brother in the radically new beloved community arising on this planet in the wake of Jesus' life, death and resurrection. That emasculated eunuch, a royal official to the Ethiopian Queen, was on his way home from Jerusalem where he would have been denied entrance to the Temple because, according the law, he was a defective human, a sub-human. He didn't fit the mold of heterosexual perfection. So he was excluded.

But there would be no such exclusion or denial of membership in the new family of God centered on Jesus. All are welcome. Well, at least that was the original idea. *Brothers and sisters*, as it turns out, is a metaphor for everybody! We must love our brothers and sister, which is to say, *everybody*.

Philip heard the call to radical, endless love.

This past week I've been reading *Living Gently in a Violent World* by French Canadian Jean Vanier. In 1947, Vanier joined the Canadian Navy. But he longed for something else to do with his life, something more than just a job or career. He didn't know what. But he was paying attention.

In 1964, through a friendship with a priest, he became aware of the plight of thousands of people institutionalized with disabilities. Vanier invited two men, Raphael and Philippe, who didn't fit the mold of perfect normalcy, to leave their institutions and live as family with him in his home in France.

Vanier called his house "The Ark."

One thing led to another, not smoothly or easily, but over the next 50 years those homes, with able and disabled living together as one family, multiplied. And now there are 150 such *families* in 35 countries, on all five continents.

Vanier heard the call to radical, endless love.

On March 25, 1911, Frances Perkins, a young, successful, refined New England blueblood, witnessed the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory fire in New York City, the deadliest industrial disaster in that city and one of the deadliest in U.S. history. One hundred forty seven poorly paid, overworked immigrant laborers were killed, many by jumping from the 8th floor windows. There were no available fire escapes. The youngest was 14 years of age.

It was a sight that changed Perkins' life forever. Up until then she had a cozy career. Now she had a vocation, a calling.

Perkins heard the call to radical, endless love.

Perkins became U.S. Secretary of Labor and served from 1933 to 1945. Under the Social Security Act she established unemployment benefits, pensions for elderly Americans, and welfare for the poorest. She pushed to reduce workplace accidents and helped craft laws against child labor. Through the Fair Labor Standards Act, she established the first minimum wage and overtime laws for workers, and set the standard 40-hour work week.

The call to love comes in many ways. For Frances Perkins the call to love came out of a fire.

This past week we saw fires burning in Baltimore. To what might those fires be calling us and our nation?

The call to love comes in many ways. And there are many ways to answer the call to love.

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HYMN
"Come, Live in the Light"
(We Are Called)