

Sweating the Small Stuff: Pass the Love On

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Psalm 78:1-8; John 19:26-27

*Give ear, O my people, to my teaching;
incline your ears to the words of my mouth.
I will open my mouth in a parable;
I will utter dark sayings from of old,
things that we have heard and known,
that our ancestors have told us.
We will not hide them from their children;
we will tell to the coming generation
the glorious deeds of the LORD, and his might,
and the wonders that he has done.*

*He established a decree in Jacob,
and appointed a law in Israel,
which he commanded our ancestors
to teach to their children;
that the next generation might know them,
the children yet unborn,
and rise up and tell them to their children,
so that they should set their hope in God,
and not forget the works of God,
but keep his commandments;
and that they should not be like their ancestors,
a stubborn and rebellious generation,
a generation whose heart was not steadfast,
whose spirit was not faithful to God.*

Psalm 78:1-8 (NRSV)

*When Jesus saw his mother and the disciple whom he loved standing beside her,
he said to his mother, "Woman, here is your son." Then he said to the disciple,
"Here is your mother." And from that hour the disciple took her into his own
home. John 19:26-27 (NRSV)*

We are in a worship service right now, and even from your homes, you're in a worship service. The theme that we've been looking at throughout all this time together is that everything we do is to be worship. Everything we do is to be an offering to God of ourselves. Every one of our daily tasks, if we'll think about why we do them, can be an offering of ourselves to God.

We looked already at taking care of our bodies, including everything from cooking to eating, going to working out, and dressing and all of those things. We talked about going to work and how our vocation is a part of our offering to God. We talked about organizing our lives, taking care of our homes, and fixing all the things that are broken - and straightening up the garage.

Today we're going to continue that by talking about how we love one another, how we take care of our families, our children, our friendships and relationships, and how important that is as an offering to God.

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

What do you think is the thesis statement of the Bible? Like in every book, you can find one place where they sort of summarize the entire theme. What would you think is the one verse that could summarize the Bible? A lot of people think it's John 3:16 with these familiar words: "For God so loved the world that he gave his only son and whosoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life."

I am prone to think it's John 13:34, "Just as I have loved you, now you should love one another." Just as I have loved you, you should pass that love on.

I want to show you some chairs. This one is my grandmother's chair. She would sit in that chair and would rock. You can tell what generation it's from because it's from that time when everyone liked that rose-colored velvet in their living room. Here's another chair and this one is my mother's chair. It's the chair that she could sit in at the end of her day. It's a recliner. Both chairs sit up in my study. That helps me remember them. My mother's chair is a sturdy one, and my mother was a sturdy lady. She was a survivor of lots of challenges.

Here's another chair, and this is my wife's chair. She sits it in at the end of the day because she's up and moving around all day long doing something. And at the end of the day, she collapses into that chair, and the dogs jump in there with her, and she dozes off.

This is another chair, and it's one of four chairs that are just alike. It was my daughters' chair when they were small. They would sit in those chairs at that table, and my grandchildren use them now. It was made by my father-in-law for my kids when they were little.

And here's something that isn't a chair at all, it's a Moses basket that my newest grandson, Jude, is in.

I just keep seeing this procession of chairs as the way that love is passed down from person to person to person. And this Mother's Day, we remember how we are shaped by those who love us.

Here's the first thing that I want us to remember today. That our act of worship each day is expressing love, sharing our love, passing on the love that Jesus gave us to somebody else, to our family.

I think it's so interesting that we can't remember almost anything - at least I can't remember - from preschool. What happened to me before I was five. There are a couple of glimpses of things I can remember but not very much. But what happened during that time - that preschool time - shaped the world more than anything for me. The love that I received, the care that I received in those first years shaped me more than anything. But I don't even remember them - all these small things that were done. There were peanut butter sandwiches that were made, the diapers that were changed. The ball that was thrown back and forth, the wrestling on the ground. All those small things that we do for one another all add up to be this love that shapes us. It's so daily, this loving that we do.

If you were to ask an investment manager what the best way would be to gather wealth by old age, here's what they'd tell you. Every paycheck, you should set some aside and invest it. And the longer you do it, the better you're going to do. It isn't this big things we do that makes the difference, it's the small things that we do every single day.

Friends, that's the way it is with love. The way we invest in loving others is through these daily experiences one after another after another. I heard this week on the radio that Francois Clemmons has a new memoir out. I haven't read it yet. You probably don't know who Francois Clemmons is until I tell you. He played Officer Clemmons on the *Mister Rogers Neighborhood* television program. He was the African American policeman friend who would come visit with Fred Rogers in those early years. It was pretty scandalous then since he was black, and Mister Rogers was white, and they were friends. There was one day when they both soaked their feet in a kiddie pool of water together. And Officer Clemmons said, "I don't have a towel." And Mr. Rogers said, "Oh, you can use mine." At that time, when swimming pools were segregated, that was quite a scandal.

Here's why I'm telling you about François Clemmons. It's perhaps because his most famous song goes this way, "There are many ways to say, 'I love you'. There are many ways to say, 'I care.' There's the singing way to say, 'I love you.' There's the singing something someone really likes to hear. Cleaning up a room can say, 'I love you.' Hanging up a coat before you're been asked to, drawing special pictures for the holidays. And making plays. You'll find many ways to say, 'I love you.' You'll find many ways to understand what love is."

It is these small things that we do. Those are for children, but there are plenty for us as adults, too.

Noël Sunderland died last year. Noël and her husband, Rev. Dr. Ron Sunderland, were part of St. Luke's for many, many years until they moved away to be near their son. And for the last three years Ron has cared for Noël as her dementia began to ravage her mind. And the last act that she did before she died - if you know Ron, you know he's got these big bushy eyebrows - and she reached out and smoothed out his eyebrows. What a special gesture.

I wrote to Ron and asked him if I could use this as an illustration in the sermon and let me share with you what he wrote back. He said, "That Noël made her last conscious movement after the last three years in which her mind had been so emptied by dementia, has been my consolation from the moment she reached out to touch me. It could not have been more meaningful, and the memory fills me with joy and peace. It blessed and made meaningful the care that was my gift to Noël during those last few years. It was her way of saying, 'I love you.'"

That small gesture meant so much. It's those small things that we do every day for our families to let them know that we love them. Those are an act of worship. "As I loved you, you love one another."

Now it isn't just our family but the broader family, our community, we pass the love on to our community as well. When Jesus is on the cross, he sees Mary and the Apostle John, the "disciple whom Jesus loved" is how the Scripture puts it. He says to his mother, "This is your son," and to John, "This is your mother." Now he wasn't just saying "Take care of my mother" - what he's saying is that "This is now family." He's redefining family so that it's not biological; it's determined by these acts of love. "Care for one another, be family for one another," he's saying. He'd said earlier when they came to visit him about the disciples, "This is my family."

We are a family together. This being part of a community makes such a huge impact. It's what we long for, to be connected to one another in love.

I want to read to you another quote, and I'll let you guess who said it. It goes like this: "We all get meaning from our communities, whether they're churches, sports teams, or neighborhood groups, they give us the strength to expand our horizons and care about broader issues. Studies have proven the more connected we are, the happier we feel, and the healthier we are. People who go to church are more likely to volunteer and give to charity. Not just because they're religious but because they're part of a community."

Who do you think said that? Well, this surprised me it's Mark Zuckerberg, the founder of Facebook. He unveiled a new mission statement a couple of years ago. He realized that this is about trying to build communities together.

We long to have a family that is beyond our biological family.

I'm so excited about this family meal ministry that we have going on at the Gethsemane campus that you heard about earlier in the service. The point of it is not just to feed kids -yes, the kids are hungry, and we want to feed them. But the point of this is to draw these young people into a family, into a community, into a sense of belonging. To experience those daily acts, simple acts of love that shape us so well. So that just as we have been loved, so too, we love one another.

There's a man who lives across the street from us, Mr. Harper, and he's the best neighbor you could possibly have. He comes by the house and rings the doorbell, and says, "Hey, I've got some tomatoes for you. I grow them in my back yard." Or he comes by and says, "Hey, here are some jalapeno poppers." Or, "Make sure and come to the street party that we're having." These aren't big things or giant things, but there are so many small things - ways he reaches out to say, "I love you."

When we moved from St. Luke's when I was the youth pastor here, to the city of South Houston, the parsonage that we moved into wasn't in really good shape. It needed to be cleaned really desperately. We had some friends, part of our family, our community, who came with us and helped us scrub the floors and paint some things, and just get it in decent shape. And that was such an act of love. It wasn't a huge thing, but it mattered so much to us.

We reach out to our community in building and investing in those relationships, those friendships, on a daily basis as an act of worship. And it makes such a difference.

In 1938 they began a study at Harvard of sophomore men. It was a longitudinal study to see how they fared over the rest of their lives. They studied them for almost 80 years. Let me read to you what they found, "The surprising finding is that our relationships and how happy we are in

our relationships have a powerful influence on our health,” said Robert Waldinger, director of the study and a psychiatrist at Massachusetts General Hospital and professor of psychiatry at Harvard Medical School. “Close relationships more than money or fame are what keep people happy through their lives, the study revealed. Those ties protect people from life’s discontents, help to delay mental and physical decline, and are better predictors of long and happy lives than social class, I.Q., or even genes. That finding proved true across the board among both Harvard men and the inner-city participants.”

Look, relationships, investing in friendships, community connections, every single day - that’s an act of worship just as Jesus has loved us, so we love one another.

Now we continue to move outward. As an act of worship, we love not just our family and our community, but we love the world. We love the whole world.

I heard an interview on the radio about these nurses who are in New York City. They’re treating Covid-19 patients who are on ventilators whose families can’t come and visit them. It’s just heartbreaking for them. The nurses take notes, and then they contact the families and talk to them about them. They say things like, “I’m parting his hair on the left side; I don’t know if that’s where it’s supposed to be parted. But he looks nice.” Or, “we hung the picture of your family right on the wall in front of him where he can see it if he opens his eyes.” These are gestures of love that we share with the world.

So, we pass along the love that God gave to us with these small daily ways, with our family, with our community, and with the whole world.

But there’s one more piece to it that I really don’t want you to miss. Listen again to what Psalm 78 says:

He established a decree in Jacob,
and appointed a law in Israel,
which he commanded our ancestors
to teach to their children;
that the next generation might know them,
the children yet unborn,
and rise up and tell them to their children,
so that they should set their hope in God,
and not forget the works of God,
but keep his commandments (Psalm 78:5-7)

Look, this love that we pass on is an instrument that can carry the faith. In other words, most of us are not going to be preached into the Kingdom, we're going to be loved into the Kingdom of God. We're going to hear the words of the Gospel from someone who loves us. And that's the way they're going to hear it.

Let me tell you a story. There was a young woman named Carol in the early 1970s who was a leader in this amazing youth group. The group was fun, they had a lot of great activities together, and there was just a really special bond in this group of young people. And one day, a young man named Mark had been in Nepal with his family. They had been living in Nepal, and he was just coming out of middle school. He didn't have any friends, so some people from this youth group invited him to the youth group. And he fell in love with it, and they loved on him, and he loved on them back again. And in the midst of it this young woman named Carol shared with Mark the Gospel of Jesus Christ, and he became a Christian. He was loved into the Kingdom. He's a pastor now in Illinois.

Well, a couple of years later Mark approached me in the cafeteria in the high school and invited me to the youth group. I came, and I loved it there. They accepted me, and I loved them back. And Mark and I became such close friends. And through that friendship, Mark shared with me the Gospel and led me to Christ. You see, it's on this love that we share that the Gospel rides.

Friends, the most important act of worship you can do just as Jesus loved us, so now we love others. In small ways. Every single day.

Let's pray together. *Gracious God, we thank you for the people who sat in those chairs for us. Those people who shaped us with love. Mothers and fathers, family and friends who did those small things day after day. Many of which we cannot even remember but we know are what made us. We thank you that they were your instrument to form us in your love. We thank you for those who told us about you, about your mighty works and about your amazing love. We pray now that our offering to you would be to pass that love on to others in whatever way we can. Just as you have loved us, show us how to love one another. In the name of Christ, we pray. Amen.*