

“Kingdom Ethics 1: Love One Another”

John 15: 9-17



Dr. Will Cotton
Senior Pastor

This week the tabloids are going wild over the death of Anna Nicole Smith. In so many ways, she is a picture of our day – the great desire for wealth and fame, the chasing after an illusive image and a certain look, the ability to be in large crowds and be absolutely lonely, the experience of having it all and having nothing at the same time. I watch the ads for Las Vegas and see something similar – the glitz and the glamour, the promise of wealth, the ability to be somebody you’re not for at least a little while and yet never getting what you really need. Is there anything besides the shallow, “here today and gone tomorrow” life we see and feel? The bible says “yes,” and it’s found in our scripture lesson for today, the experience of kingdom love.

This next week is the great celebration of romantic love. The bible is not against romantic love.

At the Master’s Program last week, Paul and Vicki’s class on marriage enrichment read some scriptures from Song of Solomon – that erotic love poem that the church has been hiding from for years. Some of you are saying, “If we had only known, we’d have been there!” Romantic love is important and I hope that you are nurturing that in your marriages. But even romantic love points to a greater love and it takes that love to sustain and grow a marriage.

There is another kind of love that belongs to us as family and friends. It’s based on shared family ties and close relationships that are not romantic. Without the love of friends and family, most of us would shrivel up and die. Humans beings are social creatures who need to connect with people who mean something to us and we mean something to them. But this love, often called filial love points to a greater love and it takes that love to sustain and grow us as family and friends.

It is that love that is at the center of what it means to live in the kingdom of God. The Greek word for it is “agape.” It is a particular kind of love that is far too rare in our world and never more needed. First of all, this love begins with the experience of God’s love in Jesus. You can’t just decide you will share agape. You have to receive it. Jesus says to his disciples, **“Abide in my love just as I abide in my Father’s love.”** The word abide is important. It means “to remain, to stay in the place where you find yourself.” Many of us “instant” people in the “instant” generation have built our spiritual lives on “quick prayers” and “quick study times.” We no longer know how to “stay in place.” We know that in marriage love on the run won’t last for long. Christ will not settle for it either. We must quit giving God 1-minute or even 5-minute stands and instead, allow that love that only develops when we stick around. Kingdom love, agape love is more than the natural love we already have. So please don’t go out of today’s service determined to be more loving. Instead go out today determined to be more open to God’s love and take the time to have that love developed and grown in you.

Second, kingdom love takes the initiative. Jesus has modeled that initiative. The first fact of our life is that we are loved, love by God in Christ. You may remember me saying some time ago, “God loves you and there isn’t a thing you can do about it.” We then become those who pass on that initiative. The first thing I should know about you is that you have made the choice to love me, whether I deserve it or not, whether we think or feel alike and whether or not I love you back. The first thing you should know

about me that I have made the choice to love you whether you deserve it, whether we think or feel alike and whether or not you love me back. Erotic love requires give and take. Filial love requires affinity and common ground. Kingdom agape love requires none of that.

Jesus says, **“Love one another as I have loved you.”** We don’t earn each other’s love by doing things for one another, for being attractive or anything else. We do things for one another because we already have made the choice for love.

I need to take this a little further. Kingdom love doesn’t just take the initiative it prefers others over self. We live in a “me-first” world. People camp out all night to get to say, “me-first:” the PS 3, the tickets for the basketball game or the concert, the place in line at Six Flags, or getting the best food or drink. But in the kingdom, the first are last and the last are first. And the motto of kingdom love is “you first.”

Not long ago I was at a local store and I was getting in line, but there was a lady who was in a very big hurry. I said to her, “Please go on ahead.” At first, she said, “Oh, no.” But I insisted. Two weeks later, someone did the same thing for me. I messed up the self-checking stuff and had to have help, delaying that nice lady several minutes. She showed me both initiating and patient love. Jesus would have said, “The kingdom has happened in your midst.”

Kingdom love is not just Christ-centered and developed or initiating and others- preferring, it is also self-sacrificing. Jesus says, **“No greater love has a man than this, to lay down his life for his friends. You are my friends, if you do what I command you.”** In other words, friends of Jesus lay down their lives for each other, just as Jesus laid down his life for them. It has taken me a long time to figure it out, but the greatest people in the world are those who are willing to put themselves aside so that others can find their greatness. The popular song sings, “You are the wind beneath my wings.” We all want to fly high, but what if our calling is to be the wind that helps others to fly high? We all want to be successful, but what if our calling is to be the one that paves the way for others to find success? What if it’s not about being known as the best mom or the best dad or the best teacher or the best preacher? What if it’s about how God uses you to develop those around you? What if it’s about standing in the gap at key times and being used of God to get things done and never be recognized? What if it’s, in the words of Jesus, about “losing your life in order to find it?” Yes, that’s the sacrificial love of the kingdom.

Now here’s the kicker. The church is to be the laboratory of this Christ-centered and developed, initiating and other’s preferring, self-sacrificial love. We are that counter-cultural movement, that “not of this world” community that practices with each other so that we can then offer kingdom love to the world. For me, that says something about how we regard each other. When we speak the truth to each other, we are not brutally honest as people pride themselves in being, but rather we speak the truth in love. When someone speaks the truth in love they give you a treasure beyond measure, but most who are brutally honest will give you a cheap shot based on their desire to have power over you. When I was a District Superintendent I had a church or two be brutally honest with me in four-letter detail. Being cussed out privately is tough, but being cussed out publicly can be quite memorable (brutal, whether it’s honest or not). I found it then and I find it still to be an unchristian thing and an un-kingdom thing to cuss one another out in the church. It may be human and it may be natural, but human and natural is not the standard, love is. And I remind you that since we’re laying down our lives for each other, just like healthy marriages, 50/50 relationships in which we each do our part is not the model. We are in 100/100 relationships in which the joy and the power happens in the overlap of our totally committed love for each other. This high sense of regard for one another is one of the hallmarks of people and the way they treat each other at St. Luke’s. Even in disagreement and difficult decision-making, the high regard is there. I pray that will continue and multiply.

Second, being the laboratory of kingdom love says something about how we do business and what ministries we participate in. The standards of kingdom love should apply. Are we centered in Christ in who he is and what he has taught us? That would mean that the gospel has more say than parliamentary procedure or the loudest or most influential opinion. Are we taking the initiative of love or are we preferring ourselves? Self-preservation has long been the pre-occupation of churches, a preoccupation for which they are judged harshly by society and by Christ. Are we willing to give ourselves away for God's agenda or is the cross merely a decorative church centerpiece? The laboratory experiment of kingdom love takes a work of God to pull off. We're not naturally wired that way. But it is to that way that we are called.

Third, eventually the laboratory must open up to benefit the outside world. That's our radical edge. What if the ethic of Christ-centered and developed, initiating and others-preferring, self-sacrificial love was the basic for economic policy? Would we hoard our wealth and exploit others to get it or would we see our resources as a sacred trust from God to better our world? Would we continue to see nations as cooperative or uncooperative, treating them accordingly, or would we see other nations and their leaders as people with whom we add value and dignity? Would we in our care of the earth, get past economics and legalisms and actually work for the love of people on this earth now and those who are yet to come? Would we in love redefine what health care meant by creating a whole different societal atmosphere in which regard and hope are the blessing of all? Would there still be negative campaigning (that process that continually weeds out the leadership we need) or would we finally make politics about the love of people, where our most gifted and impassioned leaders rise to the top? Would education still be about getting my kid ahead while yours is left to languish, or would a new atmosphere free the very best in us all? You say this is far too idealistic. Dream on. So I shall. For these are dreams we dream with God when kingdom love catches on in our day-to-day world. This is precisely where I believe God is calling us at St. Luke's in raising up a new generation of Christian leaders. They will be people strongly committed to Christ, strongly educated, strongly plugged into where things happen in society, and have Christ-centered and developed, initiating and others-preferring, self-sacrificing love at the center of what they think, say and do. Furthermore, they will, by word and example, invite their world to do the same.

It's impossible, you say. Jesus took three years to plant kingdom love in twelve disciples, a few friends, and an outer group of about 120. Then he took a day, a day called Pentecost, and by the power of the Spirit planted kingdom love in about 3,000 more. They started home laboratories in which people made kingdom love a spiritual, legal, economic and political life. They called them "churches." It's impossible, you say. But the laboratories kept multiplying in Europe and then across the Atlantic to the place called "the new world." Today the laboratories keep multiplying as labs start to sponsor other labs in which Christ-centered, self-giving, others-preferring love is shared. The movement right now is its strongest in Africa and South America. But God is not finished yet. The laboratories of love are beginning to break into the main stream and the way of love is beginning to catch. Impossible, you say. The impossible is happening and God is just warming up.

Yes, as a preacher I would commend this to you as a great way to live. But Jesus doesn't commend it...he commands it! In the lab and out in the world, the obedient people of God share Christ-centered and developed, initiating and others-preferring, self-sacrificial love and the promise of Christ is that as they do: their joy will be full. If only Anna Nicole could have known that. If only the people chasing after love in all the wrong places and the people offering their very souls to the company or for things that will never last could know that. If only those who have no love to trust and no hope to live for could know that. And God says, "By my spirit, I've started a kingdom. It's not a private club and it's not a secret. It's for the world. Love one another as I have loved you. And together change the face of the earth." And all God's people said, AMEN.