

Sermon May 17th, 2020

Christ is Our Example of Love

Have you ever sat down on a bench at a dog park, and watched how dogs interact with their human companions? Or if you don't like going to dog parks, have you ever had to watch the movie "Secret Life of Pets" with your children or grandchildren? Or do you have a dog yourself? Well, it only takes us a few minutes of observing this relationship between a dog and their human companion to figure out how much dogs love the people who care for them.

Growing up I had a dog named Buddy. Buddy was always so loving. He would be the first one to greet me when I came home. Tail wagging. Jumping up and down with excitement. Barking barks of joy. Sniffing and licking me. So happy to see me. Then after some persistence Buddy had me on the floor roughhousing with him. Buddy enjoyed spending time with me, and I enjoyed spending time with him.

However, our relationship wasn't all fun and games. Buddy was also there for me when I needed someone to talk to. When I was angry, Buddy would listen to me vent. When I was sad Buddy would cuddle with me for hours listening to me pour out my heart. When I didn't treat Buddy as well as I should have, I would apologize. Buddy forgave me without a second thought. I could see genuine empathy in Buddy's eyes when he was present with me through the struggles I faced.

I don't know what you think, but in my experience of watching dogs interact with their human companions, I think love comes naturally to dogs. They seem to be born with this innate ability to love someone for all of who they are. This is why people who have dogs say they are the most loyal pet.

Well, for most of us, love isn't something that comes naturally. We learn how to love. From our parents. To our mentors. To our elders. To even the role models we choose to follow from television, social media, or our favorite sports team. Study after study has come to similar conclusions. For most of us love is something we learn to live out. Not something we naturally do.

Just look at our developmental stages. When we are babies our main focus is on our survival. To love someone else and think of their needs isn't our first concern. If it was we probably wouldn't be waking Mommy and Daddy up three or four times in the middle of the night to change our diaper and feed us. We wouldn't be crying and crying while our parent is watching their favorite television program. We wouldn't be so stubborn that we swat the spoon of food Mommy is trying to put in our mouth right in her face. Or throw up all over Daddy when he goes to pick us up. As babies we need to focus on getting what we need.

This doesn't change a lot when we become toddlers and then preschoolers and then children and even teenagers. We spend that time depending on others for our needs, and many times struggle to see the needs of others.

We also spend a lot of our childhood trying to observe how the people in our lives love us, and meet our needs. This is what shapes us into being loving towards others. Especially when we come to an age where others are dependent on us.

In our gospels, Jesus dedicates three years of his life to a small group of followers with the intention of showing them how to reflect God's love to others. Or in other words, Jesus is teaching them how to love. Jesus shows us this love by healing those who are hurting. Reflecting God's compassion. Jesus shows us this love by genuinely listening to those who have questions. Reflecting God's caring nature. Jesus shows us this love by accepting those who are outcasted by society. Reflecting God's hospitality. Jesus shows us this love by challenging injustice and oppression. Reflecting God's just rule. Jesus shows us this love by feeding and clothing those living in poverty. Reflecting God's giving nature. Jesus shows us this love by giving himself up for us. Reflecting God's grace. Jesus is our best example of love to follow, and invites us to love others as Jesus loves us.

Unfortunately, it isn't easy to love as Jesus loves. Because to love someone makes us vulnerable. It opens us up to getting hurt. There is a risk that comes with loving someone. And it doesn't help that for many of us, we have been hurt along the way when we have tried to love someone. We have suffered disappointment and heartache.

Sometimes these fears lead us into building walls to protect us from getting hurt. We create judgments in our heads to keep people away that we feel are a threat to hurting us. We allow anger to creep in making it even harder to love. Maybe even acting this anger out in unhealthy ways. It isn't easy to love like Jesus loves. It isn't easy to tear down the walls that lead us to judge, and at our worst, hate. It isn't easy to reach out to those who we had once rejected. It isn't easy to share of our means when we keep worrying about not having enough. It isn't easy to stand up to oppression and injustice, because we too might get hurt. It isn't easy to heal someone who is hurting or to even know what that healing would look like. It isn't easy to love as Jesus loves.

Then sometimes we have trouble hearing Jesus' example, because we didn't experience a good example of love from a person in our home or our life growing up. Sometimes our parents fail to love us for who we are. Sometimes our parents don't know how to love us, because they didn't experience a good example of love in their childhood. We see so much generational trauma connected to people who struggle to love. It isn't easy to love as Jesus loves.

This is why Jesus promises us an advocate. The Holy Spirit. Who helps us love others as Jesus loves us. Who breaks down those walls inside us allowing us to stop judging and hating our sisters and brothers. Allowing us to reach out to others. Not living in fear, but with trust in God. The Spirit that listens to us when we pray for a loving heart. The Spirit that points us to the scriptures to show us how much God loves us, and to open our hearts to feel that love. To feel inspired by this love, so to, love others. The Spirit that invites people into our lives who love us the way we deserve to be loved. Who are good examples for us to follow. The Spirit that opens our eyes to see where we can be a loving presence for others. The Spirit that over and over reflects God's gracious love for us as we stumble and fall through life trying to be this loving example to others. Including being good examples for our own children when we become parents.

It isn't easy to love as Jesus loves, but with the help of the Holy Spirit. With the promise that Jesus will be present with us always. With the examples Jesus sets for us in our gospels. With the people God places in our lives who are good examples for us to follow. We are able to let down those walls and love others as Jesus loves us. We are able to learn and grow from our shortcomings to become the loving examples God has created us to be.

Let us pray, loving God, we give thanks that you send your Son to be a loving example for us. May we be inspired by your love and your Spirit to love others as you love us. With that same grace, compassion, and hospitality. In Jesus name we pray, **Amen.**

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