

**Sermon: Constraints of Love**

**Scripture: John 15:9-17**

**Preacher: Rev. Will Burhans**

**Date: May 9, 2021**

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We retrace our steps in the Gospels as we move through this Easter season in order to pick up in the Gospel of John some of the things that Jesus said of himself right before his passion and death so we can know better this resurrection reality that is Christ Jesus. And the theme today is one of the central themes of Jesus' earthly life and resurrected life and that is LOVE. Jesus places love at the center of what his relationship with God was about, Love is what his purpose was in going to the cross, and Love is what he asks of us. Love, love, love.

Of course we have one word for love in English while in Greek there are 4 words. CS Lewis titled one of his more famous works that – The 4 Loves – and laid out the 4 Greek words – the first being STORGE which is love associated most often with familial love between parent and child or siblings, PHILIA which is the love of friendship, often a chosen love that derives from familiarity and fondness, EROS which is romantic love that usually has a sexual expression to it and finally AGAPE which is unconditional love that exists regardless of changing conditions also known as the love of God. There are obviously important distinctions between these concepts of love but agape, from a Christian's perspective, the love of God, is the true source and end of all love and in so far as our love does not derive and circle back to agape, to unconditional God love, then there's a certain sense in which it is not fully love or at best it's tainted love. And from a Christian perspective since love sits at the center of our concept of God and

because we say we live move and have our being in God - in love - then we as humans are most alive in relationships of love whether eros, philia, storge, or agape.

But there's a paradox in this living in love that Jesus highlights in his teaching this morning and that the writer and pastor, Rev. Timothy Keller articulates this way – "Human beings are most free and alive in relationships of love and only become ourselves in love and yet healthy love relationships involve mutual, unselfish service to one another and necessarily a mutual loss of freedom or independence." He goes on "To experience the joy and freedom of love, you must give up your personal autonomy." And that can be painful. In so far as we are unwilling to lose our independence due to love, we sacrifice intimacy and ultimately love itself. CS Lewis said it like this:

Love anything and your heart will certainly be wrung and possibly broken. If you want to make sure of keeping it intact you must give your heart to no one, not even to an animal. Wrap it carefully around with work, hobbies and little luxuries; avoid all entanglements, lock it up safe in the casket or coffin of your self but know that in that casket it will change. It will not be broken, it will become unbreakable, impenetrable, irredeemable. You'll avoid tragedy but the alternative to the tragedy that can be love, is damnation.

Jesus says "love each other as I have loved you and greater love has no other than this: to lay down one's love for one's friends." Sacrificial love is a way we often refer to Jesus' act of self-giving on the cross but it's actually a redundant statement because love to be real is necessarily sacrificial, it entails giving up one's self, limiting one's own autonomy and freedom, forsaking one's own needs at times, being willing to hurt, for the sake of the other. In romantic love

relationships, or spousal relationships, ideally it's MUTUAL, the self-giving, in order for love to be true. But in relationships of unequal power like a mother to a child, then there must be an active self-giving on the part of the one in the position of power to meet the other. The image of Jesus nailed to the cross is the ultimate image of love because it's him giving fully and completely of himself, sacrificing his freedom and autonomy, suffering, for the sake of his friends, for the sake of the world.

How is that reflected in your love for your children or your spouse or your friends? When have you stepped up and given what love has asked of you, sacrificed your own freedom, autonomy, needs, for the sake of the other? Simply by having children many of us learn that lesson pretty quickly, that our love for them requires a certain amount of sacrificing of our own lives. In simply getting married many of us learn that lesson, that we are intentionally sacrificing our freedom and our own needs and comfort at times because that is what love requires of us

But don't we also resist that at times? Don't we all struggle with that dynamic and know moments of resisting the sacrifice that love requires of us in relationship to spouse, children, or friends. Of course we do because we are human, broken, sinful humans and we can be driven by fear at times and find ourselves locked in patterns of self-protection, self-preservation, self-advancement at the expense of others... or we find ourselves in relationships with others who are locked in selfishness and cannot enter into the mutual exchange necessary for eros love to flow in and out of agape love. Love requires constraints and restraints and relinquishments and yet love's constraints and relinquishments make us more free and ultimately more satisfied than ever.

Some of you know this very well, the demands of love that constrain you, but others of us should remember to practice it intentionally, to experiment with it. Ask ourselves – what is love asking of me in this instance through my spouse or my child or my friend that I am not wanting to do or feel resistant to. And then do it anyway because that's what love does and see if what had felt like diminishment and loss doesn't become freedom and gain.

Jesus is the image of that love. There, nailed to the cross out of love, you'd think he was as constrained and confined and dependent and eventually dead as he could be, quite the opposite of free and everything we want to be. Then he was shut away in a dark and sealed tomb and though it felt like a dead-end finality the ultimate expression of love didn't end in a dark and closed up casket but broke open to the broad daylight of a new world and a new day. That's the truth of love, the more we protect and defend ourselves against what love asks of us for fear of the toll that path of self-sacrifice and loss will make upon us, the more we actually lose. Our effort to avoid that tomb is what locks us away in the tomb, condemned by our efforts to save ourselves.

And conversely the more we can find pathways of love despite the sacrifice that is required of us the more we discover the light breaking through, the tomb and the heart emptied in order to be filled with light and love beyond measure and that is the light of life, that's how our lives become something of a candle shedding light in a dark world and that's how together our life-candles can bring greater light and peace to our relationships, granting us peace, dona nobis pacem, amen!