

Love, Actually
John 15:9-17
Sermon by Joanne Gallardo
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9As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love. 10If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commandments and abide in his love. 11I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete.

12 This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. 13No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends. 14You are my friends if you do what I command you. 15I do not call you servants any longer, because the servant does not know what the master is doing; but I have called you friends, because I have made known to you everything that I have heard from my Father. 16You did not choose me but I chose you. And I appointed you to go and bear fruit, fruit that will last, so that the Father will give you whatever you ask him in my name. 17I am giving you these commands so that you may love one another.

I'm a part of this online community for people who used to be members of the IFB church, or Independent Fundamental Baptist Church. If you're unfamiliar with this denomination, there are many resources out there to look them up. There's a 20/20 special, there's a documentary called "Born Again," and there are plenty of articles written by church historians and former and current members that can give you a broader perspective than the one I'm about to give. This online community calls this church a "cult," and while I viewed the church as that for a long time I no longer do. Many former members call themselves "survivors" which is not something I claim myself. However, I feel that the church damaged my outlook on Christianity and what it means to be a follower of Jesus.

God was a God of judgment, eager to send people to hell who weren't IFB. Or if they were female and wore pants. Or if they kissed before marriage. Or if they went to the movies, listened to popular music, read certain books about magical children, if you didn't enthusiastically support Israel, if you watched the liberal news (this was before Fox News became a thing, so basically anything that wasn't that little news segment in the middle of Pat Robertson's show), forgot to tithe, or

didn't spank their children. Yes, many, many things could send you to hell, feminism and environmentalism were at the top of the list, but you could avoid a life of eternal damnation if you gave your heart to Jesus and joined not just any church, the IFB church. If you thought this was a onetime occurrence, you'd be wrong. You had to continually get up, every time you had backslidden (remember, that could be because of a bad thought or embezzlement), walk up to the front near the alter, kneel, squeeze out a few tears, then contritely walk back to your seat.

I know I'm speaking about this with a lot of cynicism, this was a very real experience for many people, and it still is. But I observed my mother do this on many occasions, and she would quickly go back to her pants-wearing, movie watching, full out cussing self, so I quickly became disillusioned with the whole process. I also knew my fellow Sunday School members whose parents were the first to give their lives to Jesus again, only to abuse their children behind closed doors.

Everything I did in that church was out of fear. The singing, the praying, the Christian Ed, I did it all because I was afraid God would hate me if I didn't do it. I didn't want to go to hell. And I was reminded of my mortality every time I went to church, so who was to say that my young life wouldn't get snuffed out tomorrow and I would end up on God's "naughty" list? I thought I was headed straight for hell several times, one was during communion that I took in an "unworthy manner," another was when I told my mom I had doubts. I was told that was blasphemous. And then, of course, there was the time I casually mentioned I went and saw a movie. That, I was told, did not glorify God.

And there was this weird dynamic happening each Sunday about the greater the sin confessed, the greater God could "shine" in one's life. I never had anything "juicy" to confess, so indeed, my trips up to the alter were rather boring and my life, in general, was rather dull.

That was my 8 year old self. My 33 year old self loves wearing pants while reading the previously forbidden Harry Potter series having just come back from the movies wearing my pro-Palestinian scarf just before I settle in to watch Rachel

Maddow before I have to be at my left leaning (in comparison to the church I was in for much of my life) church for a meeting where, lo and behold, I'm the female pastor. I love that I can do all those things without fear of my eternal destination. But my friends in my online community are still stuck.

Some of us are still in the church. Many are not. Many mock God, and theology, and Christianity in general. It makes me sad. I get where they're coming from, but I certainly don't see things that way. One person wrote "There was no love at my church. Only hate and what not to do." Others yet say "So my mom tells me I'm going to hell because I rejected salvation. I'm a good person, this is such a hateful church." Being a part of a congregation that is full of love, in my view, this broke my heart. While I cannot quote scripture to these folks who have been so fully hurt by the church, I can quote Harry Potter, and I try to remind them of the quote, told to an angsty, teenage Harry, "We are protected, in short, by our ability to love." Our ability to love and to be loved in return is at the heart of Jesus' message in John 15. That same love, the eventual love that Jesus shows us on the cross, is our deliverance from the powers that be. I wish that this was something I heard growing up, and I also hope it is something I can take to heart now.

Jesus is at his most compassionate here, giving a verbal love letter to his disciples. He urges them to love one another, just as he loved them, and just as God loves them all. This isn't just one big love fest, Jesus is clear to say that keeping God's commandments is key to remaining in that love. I can see how that can be interpreted as God's love having stipulations, or that God's love is conditional. I don't see this being the case.

Many folks who hold certain theology are quick to point out that Christianity is not all about love and acceptance, but I see this scripture as being the very definition of that. God's commandments do not exclude and say who's in and who's out, rather, they orient us back to God. Not to a God that needs our worship, praise, and adoration to feel loved and important, but a God who wants to be in relationship with us. When asked, Jesus told the disciples that the greatest commandment was to love the Lord their God with all their heart. I don't

see this as God needing our love to function, but asking that we be in mutual relationship with God, an ask from God to love back as fiercely as we are loved.

Not only that, but we are friends, friends of the divine. We are no longer servants, but friends. This is yet another example of how God desires relationship, not just our praise and adoration in exchange for eternal life. This isn't a transaction, this is community, this is friendship and right relationship.

The second greatest commandment, from Jesus' own words, is to love our neighbor as ourselves. God doesn't just want us to be in relationship to God's self, God wants us to be in right relationship with everybody. And I believe this is where we get lost. Whether that is a person with a different skin color, a different culture, a different political view, a different sexual orientation, a different gender, someone who thinks and processes different than you, someone who's of a different era, it really doesn't matter to God. God did not specify, God told us to love our neighbor. And Jesus makes "loving one another" a commandment.

I feel that in today's environment, even though the whole world is not fundamentalist Christian, we are quick to root out what we hate, what we're not supposed to do, who's in, who's out, and who gets to decide these things. Culture tells us what "bad people" look like, and what they do. We've created for ourselves a modern day slavery in the prison industrial complex, having people, mostly people of color, serving out decades long sentences for minor infractions. How is that having love for one another? We keep women and men from their loved ones, jobs, and general well being for crimes white people commit and get away with every day in every city across the U.S. These people, those who are on the "outside" are not deserving of our love. Even beyond this, we build walls, threaten people with nukes, and put obstacles in place to put "others" as far from us as possible. Because, after all, isn't it about us? Our protection? Our comfort?

Jesus doesn't seem to think so. Jesus tells us that no one has greater love than to lay one's life down for one's friends. God tells us that those who keep God's commandments are abiding in love. Jesus tells us that God's joy is made complete in us.

Do we have that kind of love within us? I think we can all think of people whom we love fiercely, people usually within our family, or others who are very close to us. But God does not have us limit our love to them. Our neighbors reach beyond the confines of our family, beyond our circles and groups of friends; this love has us move to the world around us.

I keep referring to love as “fierce” because I feel that is the type of love that is most needed today, in our context, in our space. Fierce love moves people from inaction to action, from a holiday card greeting type of love to a sense of duty and protection of others. Love requires action, and for Jesus, that action is the eventual laying down of his life for his friends.

Not all of us are faced with the decision every day whether or not we lay down our lives for someone, or some purpose. While some will be faced with that decision, many will not. It makes me think of people who act as protectors in active shooter situations. Many people have been shot while trying to usher people to safety, people whom they know, as well as people they likely don't. Imagine people who actively protect people they do not know with their own life.

Yet I also think of the everyday situations where we are able to demonstrate our love for our neighbor. Recently, I was taken aback by the arrest of two black men at a Starbucks in Philly a few weeks ago. Their crime was that they were waiting for someone to show up. They asked to use the restroom. A barista saw them not yet ordering, and called the police. People were quick to whip out phones to take video and pictures of the men being arrested by white police, yet I saw no one try to help these two men. No Starbucks employee stepped in to say that this was unjust, no patron stepped in to ask why they were being arrested, no one helped them by telling them they had a right to ask why they're being detained or held, people just watched.

There was an opportunity there to fulfill Jesus' commandment to love one another, and yet, no one took it. This may be a more extreme situation, but how many times have we let things “happen?” That relative makes a slightly racist comment, your coworker that you really like said something a little bigoted, a stranger harasses immigrant folks in our community. You shrug, or you're silent,

or you go about your day saying that what's happening is "none of your business." But it is our business. Jesus' commandment makes it our business.

We are all guilty of it, I often think of things I should have said or done later. And of course, we all have different ways of handling things, and not everyone's response is to be exceptionally confrontational. But I also think of the love that can come from speaking as a community. A number of weeks ago now, a city councilman read, an inflammatory article in a public space that demonized black and brown folk. The response in the community speaking to love, seemed to me, to be overwhelming. People spoke up, both verbally and in writing, risking stalking (in the case of one woman), or being harassed themselves, and this external pressure led to this councilman's resignation.

Many people see Christianity through the lens of people like this councilman. These are people who tell us who to demonize, or to hate, or to focus negative energy on. Many of these people claim to be church-going, family values loving, and fully righteous people. These people remind me of those in my IFB church growing up. The strict boundaries of who is in and who is out, of what is righteous behavior and what is not, and who's to blame for that behavior.

As we learned in our Gospel story, God doesn't just love us, God desires us to receive joy. When you're in relationship with someone, you of course want what's best for them, but you also want them to be happy. Our joy is important to God. Our happiness, our wellbeing, our thriving is what God wants to see. God wants God's joy to grow and abide in us. Do we have room in our lives to fully receive God's joy? Are there things in our lives that may be separating us from God's joy?

As I talk about things like joy and love and all things that make us feel good, I am also very aware that right now, there are people who just aren't feeling it. Life events, work, relationships, our own brain chemistry, all these things can leave us feeling defeated, and down, or like we're failing miserably because we're just not feeling God's love right now. Jesus' words are nice, and they're pretty, but when it's hard to see past getting through to the next day, or even hour or minute, Jesus' talk of love can be just that...talk.

I think this is one of the reasons God desires for community to thrive. When there are those in our community who may not be feeling God's love, who feel separated from God's joy, or who simply need to be shown love, that is where our God-inspired movement to action and God's dream for God's community meet. Laying down our lives can mean many things. Of course it can mean the extreme of dying in order to give eternal life, as Jesus was foreshadowing his own death. It can also simply mean laying down our self-centeredness, our pride, our fear of people who "aren't well," the complications of our life to be present to one another, to sit with the uncomfortable, to walk with those who feel alone in their journey. We do this no matter the journey, whether it be one of mental health, of someone who has been marginalized in society, to people we encounter every day. If we give up some part of our life in order to better show another Christ's love, then we are fulfilling God's commandment for us to love, making our own joy complete in God, and calling one another friends. This is God's dream, and this is at the heart of community.

So what is love, actually? The movie by the same name sells us on the idea that love is all around us. Which may be true if you're Caucasian and wealthy. For others, this couldn't be farther from the truth. We live in a world that's sorely lacking in love. Not lust, not worship of all kinds, not infatuation, but actual love. We have people who call themselves Christians telling us what we can do so that God loves us more, and who to not love because of whom they are (which to them would be people outside of God's love). We have a society that values the young, the beautiful, people who can promote capitalism with their endless energy for productivity, the married with children, the folks with money, and those who live life with a healthy dose of both fear and gullibility. We have our own nature that gravitates towards wanting to make things easy and comfortable. So the words of Jesus are calling us to a different kind of love. Love is actually really difficult. Love actually involves laying down one's life, in more ways than one. Love actually means a right relationship with God and others. Love actually means having to get over yourself in some way and move toward that which may not be easy. Love is actually really, really complex, sometimes painful, and challenging.

We can be thankful to Jesus that we are considered up to the task. We are worthy of that love ourselves, so we can take heart in knowing that we are trusted enough to be bearers of that love to one another. May we find ourselves worthy of this task. Amen.