

Marked by a Loving God
South Meriden Trinity United Methodist Church
May 19, 2019

Acts 11:1-18

John 13:31-35

Prayer: Loving and most holy God, pour out your Holy Spirit on us gathered here this morning, and open our hearts and minds as we reflect on your word. Teach us to love you, one another, and all our neighbors with our hearts, minds, souls, and all that we are. And, may the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

[MARKED BY GOD’S LOVE] Good morning, and thank you again for welcoming me into this sacred space to share in worship with you this morning. If you didn’t get a chance to meet me earlier, let me just say that my name is Maggie Carr, I am a certified lay servant with preaching credentials in the Connecticut District of the United Methodist Church, and I feel incredibly blessed to be here this morning.

After I found out that I would be preaching here this morning, I wanted to find some really wonderful slides to enhance our worship time together. [BLANK] So, I went online and Googled “slides for worship.”

Imagine my surprise when the first response to appear was a row of pictures of [PLAYGROUND SLIDE] playground-type slides – the type of slides families might want to buy to make their backyards more fun for their children and their children’s friends. Why on earth, I wondered, did Google think we needed playground slides for worship? Then I began to think, what would it be like if we had playground slides for worship?

Can you imagine the aisles and the space between the pews and the altar rails filled with playground slides of every description and all of us climbing up and sliding down? Some of us might be giggling a bit or laughing out loud with the sheer joy of rediscovering a fun part of childhood. Others might be kneeling at the foot of a slide, eyes filled with love, offering encouragement and security to a frightened toddler who has cheerfully climbed to the top but now is terrified of the ride down. Still others might be offering equally loving encouragement to an adult who has climbed eagerly to the top and then realized it has been decades since we swung our legs in front of us and gracefully glided down. Time spent in loving community on a playground might actually be something of a worshipful experience in itself.

[BLANK] Obviously the word “slide” has many meanings – and the word “love” has many more. We talk about loving the latest movie we saw or our favorite food or our new pair of shoes. We

talk about the love among members of our families. We talk about romantic love. We have been taught by the songs, movies, books, and poetry that pervade our culture that love is blind, that there is –or perhaps there is not – such a thing as love at first sight, that the course of true love never runs smooth, that love will break our hearts.

[FIRST “LOVE ONE ANOTHER” SLIDE] In today’s Gospel reading, Jesus commanded his disciples to love one another as he had loved them, and, in speaking this commandment, he was talking about a different kind of love than we typically talk about in our everyday conversation. He was talking about loving as he loved – with an eternal, unflinching, unalterable love. He was talking about loving with profoundly deep compassion, becoming vulnerable to the world’s pain, and hungering for justice. He was talking about the kind of love that led him to eat with outcasts and sinners, prostitutes, the unclean, the impure, the unloved .He was talking about the kind of love that led even Jesus to stretch the boundaries of his own love. He was talking about the kind of love that is described in 1 Corinthians 13: the kind of love that is patient and kind, that isn’t jealous or rude or even irritable, that doesn’t keep a record of complaints; the kind of love that puts up with all things, hopes for all things, endures all things. Jesus was talking about the kind of love that never fails. Jesus was talking about the kind of love that comes from God – the kind of love that seems almost impossible to describe.

As important as it is to attempt to grasp the kind of love that Jesus commands of his disciples, it is important to understand the timing of this commandment. Jesus was talking with his disciples at the last supper. He had already washed the feet of all the disciples including Judas, and then let it be known that Judas would betray him. The disciples went with him to the garden to pray but fell asleep after he asked them to stay awake. Peter was going to deny him three times before morning. It was going to be difficult for the disciples to love each other after all this disappointing behavior. Yet, it was at this very time when Jesus commanded his disciples to love.

It was at this very time, when Jesus knew his earthly ministry was coming to an end, that he wanted to tell his disciples a few very important things for them – and for us – to remember always. The first of these things was to love one another as fully and deeply as he had loved them.
[BLANK]

We are reminded by today’s reading from the Book of Acts that we are called to share God’s love well beyond our own small communities of faith.

A couple of years ago at Christmas my son-in-law Russell gave me a little book called *Being Disciples: Essentials of the Christian Life*, written in 2016 by Rowan Williams, a former

Archbishop of Canterbury. I have turned to this book often, when struggling with questions about how we as 21st century disciples are called to live out Jesus' commandment to love as Jesus loved.

Rowan Williams describes discipleship as “a state of being.” Discipleship is a state of being that incorporates staying and seeing.

Rowan Williams says, “To get some perspective on the Biblical sense of the disciples' identity means first and foremost the simple willingness to be CONSISTENTLY in Christ's company.” Discipleship has a NON-INTERMITTENT quality. It is more about who we ARE or what we BECOME than it is something we DO from time to time.

We stay with Christ—or abide in Christ --when we meet together as we are this morning, when we read scripture more deeply, when we cultivate a degree of inner stillness. As disciples, we are ready to learn deeper levels of attentiveness to all people, places, and things. We look at everything with what Rowan Williams calls “the eye of expectancy, waiting for something of God to blossom within it...looking and waiting for the light to break through...[we] become attentive to where Jesus is going; keeping company with those he is with.” We become willing to bring an active and transfiguring love into this situation of expectancy.

[SECOND “LOVE ONE ANOTHER” SLIDE] Rowan Williams said, “Being disciples means being called to see others from the perspective of an eternal and unflinching unalterable love.”

Some of the people whose company we keep will be unexpected. They will be people we might not otherwise get to know – the kind of people Jesus spent time with.

How might we as 21st century disciples reach out with love in everyday life? This old Facebook post from the Bangor Police Department offered what, for me, has been a memorable example of how reaching out in love might work:

The man had holes in his sneakers. He was walking up Hammond Street in the sleet, slush, and rushing water. When you walk uphill and the water is flowing downhill, it is better to have your soles attached to your shoes.

His were not.

Probably hundreds of people drove by him, hundreds looked at him. But how many people actually saw him?

Dawn did.

She called us. She offered to purchase a pair of boots for the man. She hoped that we might find him and speak to him.

The man who was cold, had now been seen.

Officer Jermaine Walker located the man a short time later on a side street. Still walking. Still cold and wet. Old sneakers with flapping soles and socks that you would have thrown away a long time ago.

Walker brought the man back to the station to get him warmed up a bit. Walker was well aware that we have been overrun with donated socks this year. Simple gifts from local businesses. TJ Maxx, Winterport Boot, local people, and people from far way.

Walker helped the man find appropriate socks for the season and gave him a pair of his own boots to tide him over until the other boots could be secured. They fit nicely.

We all are more alike than we are different.

What you might not understand about folks that live on the street is that they don't typically ask for help. Sometimes they just need to be seen.

“Sometimes they just need to be seen.” Dawn, the woman in this story was attentive and saw the man whose feet were getting so terribly wet. Officer Walker was expectant and believed he would find the man and would be able to help. And together they brought about what I believe Rowan Williams would consider “God-shaped change” in the life of this man who discovered that there are indeed people in the world who care – people who indeed love others as Jesus loved his disciples and as God loves each and every one of us.

Sometimes, strengthened by the love of this community, we go out from this place and share God’s love as individuals, like Dawn in this story. Other times we will reach out as church communities, like you do with Unity House. However we are called to share, let us reach out and spread God’s love as Jesus commanded. Amen.