

“Abide In Love”

John 15:9-17

Pastor Liz Miller

May 9, 2021

If I had to sum up my theology in three words, I would say, “God is love.” I choose those three words because no matter which way you arrange them, it invites us into a deeper exploration and understanding of what they mean.

God.

God is.

God is love.

Love.

Love is.

Is love God?

Love is God.

We are a church that celebrates much of the diversity we hold, in our identities, in our faith backgrounds and journeys that led us to Edgewood, but we all proclaim that God is love. Most frequently when we talk about our call to love, we most frequently evoke the scripture passage that tells us to love our neighbors and we look outward - to how we live out our love in the world, how we care for people and places we don't personally know or may never travel to, how we are interconnected to every aspect of creation and what that loving all of creation requires of us.

This passage we heard from the Gospel of John speak of a different aspect of love - not so much what we put out in the world, but the love that exists between us - meaning you, and me, the other people who are worshipping together as one church, physically apart but connected as one people, one community, one church. Jesus' commandment is for us to love one another as he loved his disciples, that there is no greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends. This is a love that speak to the intimacy and care between people who know each other, who live together in community, who share life with one another by challenging each other to grow in discipleship, by practicing vulnerability and compassion for one another, who come together to worship, serve, eat, and do the work of the church together. This is not an out there kind of love, but a right here in front of us kind of love.

Perhaps you did not know that joining the church included a commandment to lay down your life for your friends, and perhaps now that you are hearing this, you have some questions. I don't blame you. It sounds a little ominous, right? Is Jesus saying that you should literally give up your life for your friends? And if so, what counts as a friend? Every friend you have or just a few select ride-or-die kind of friends? There are some important distinctions you might want to consider before sending me an email to ask how binding your membership is.

Jesus is always pointing his disciples, and by extension us, toward God's love and away from what the systems of power in the world tell us love is. So if capitalism tells us that love means looking out for number one and lavishing yourself with whatever makes you feel good, God's love tells us that being number one doesn't matter if you leave someone else hungry or unhoused or suffering. If political systems tell us there are insiders and outsiders, citizens and foreigners, God's love tells us that there should be no barriers or borders because we are all siblings in Christ. Laying down your life for your friends means rejecting what those systems of

power and politics tell us in order to care for each other, to create a micro-community where there is no caste system or hierarchy, where everyone who is hungry is welcome at the table and given something to eat.

This is what we practice in our church every time we say that all are welcome to participate in communion or to be baptized or to be married or memorialized in our church. It is what we practice when we say if you are struggling to navigate the healthcare system, we have a Health Ministry Team and Faith Community Nurse who will assist you. If you are need gas or food or help with a bill in order to make it to the next paycheck, we'll fill that gap for you. If you are struggling to be parent and teacher and playmate to your child, we have a village of people longing to support you. If you wonder if you are the only one who has doubts and questions or has experienced hurt because of religion, we have people who will share their stories and help you realize you are not alone. Everything we do as a church is about living out God's love for each other, about being in community which requires compromise, collaboration, negotiation, and even sacrifice in order to make sure that God's love weaves through everything we do and how we care for one another.

This last year, year and a half, year and forever has been a lot of things but it has also been our greatest living testimony to the way we willing to lay down our life for our friends. From the beginning of the pandemic Edgewood has been unwaveringly committed to protecting the most vulnerable among us, first our elders and now our children and youth who are navigating a world that is opening back up while they wait to be vaccinated and remain at risk. Never once has Edgewood's leadership considered making a decision that left one group behind. Never once has Edgewood's membership asked us to do so. We have laid down our lives for each other, picking

up computer screen and phones and adapting in ways we never imagined in order to keep God's love central to the church as the COVID-19 virus rages around us.

We have normalized all that we have sacrificed and given up, because normalizing this experience is an important part of coping and adapting, but I want you know that I feel how much you are longing to gather together again.

This past month with church members in Edgewood's courtyard. I'm almost at my goal of meeting with 100 people, and it's been a wonderful way to help me prepare for a summer sabbatical away. When someone arrives I meet them at the front door and we cut through the church building together to get to the courtyard. Every single time the same thing happens: when we reach the spot in the church hallway in front of the name tag board, they pause. Sometimes they look backward and take in what they just walked by in slower reflection. Sometimes their leg automatically swings toward the double doors of the sanctuary instead of the door to the courtyard. I hear folks take a deep breath in and slowly exhale, "It's been so long."

The name tag board is the transition space between our sanctuary and social hall. It is the place people informally gather before Sunday worship, reconnecting with friends or introducing themselves to new visitors. It is the place I used to walk by at 9:57am and say, "You can chat during the sermon; go find a seat!" The name tag board is not a place any of us would describe as sacred in our building, but again and again I see the body memory people have in that spot and how it comes out in a hushed tone, a pause, a noticing.

There is so much about being the church that is not about the building, but it is also about the building. Our building is a container for so many relationships, experiences, and moments of connecting with the sacred. Our building holds memories of children growing up, loved ones memorialized, queer folks feeling God's love for their whole selves for the very first time. Our

building is where I personally met some of my heroes for the first time - Dar Williams! Austin Channing Brown! Jennifer Harvey! - reflecting the good ministry that is cultivated in that space.

Which is to say, I see what you have given up this past year, year and a half, year and forever. I see how you have chosen to love one another and make personal sacrifices for the greater good as we worship online and meet each other outdoors. We are not an either/or people, we are people of both/and/all. So, I have watched you embrace the idea that the Holy Spirit connects wherever and however we gather AND I know how much you long to regather in the sanctuary. I have watched you champion the decisions our church leadership has made AND I know you wonder if we'll ever sing in person again. I know that no amount of flash or craft in prerecorded or Zoom worship replicates the sensation of being together in our sanctuary in the round that was carefully designed such that no one can socially distance themselves from the rest of the body of Christ. I'm thankful for a church that can hold our grief and our longing to be together alongside our values and commitment to caring for the most vulnerable among us. I'm thankful we can still do this hard thing trusting that behind the scenes our leaders are planning, preparing, and equipping us to regather as soon as humanly, safely, inclusively, equitably possible.

There is not one of us that does not long to be together in person, and while I believe that will be very soon and while our leadership works to prepare the sanctuary and ensure everyone's safety, I am grateful that you all keep choosing to love one another. You show up on Youtube and Facebook. You show up for yet another Zoom meeting or gathering. You have found each other on walks and in backyards and out on the lawn. You have laid down life as you knew it in order to love each other. My message today is not one that requires a change of course, but it is one of gratitude - for the ways you model love, for the ways you commit yourself to God's love,

for the ways you teach me, your pastor, what love means and looks like in every situation and in every season.

God is love,

You are love.

We are love.

Together, we are God's love.

May it be so. Amen.