

Abiding Together In Love

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1 John 4:7-21; John 15:1-8

Lewinsville Presbyterian Church

May 2, 2021 – Easter 5 – 1st Sunday Back at LPC Worship

Christ is risen! Christ is risen indeed! (Man, that sounds good.)

It is good to be back together. It's not just like it once was, and it's not yet like it will be in the future. But it is good to be back together. In the coming weeks and months, we look forward to moving into new phases of our life together.

Though many things are changing around us, what continues to be clear – especially from the two passages that Spencer just read for us – is that the nature of the church revolves around the reality of love. Love must be the axis around which the church revolves, because love is the axis around which the life of God revolves.

“God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them.”

Which raises a *very* interesting question for Lewinsville Presbyterian Church. What would it look like for Lewinsville Presbyterian Church to live in the dog-eat-dog Washington, DC, area *from love*? In the midst of our hyper-competitive, polarizing area; in the midst of the fact that our area has enormous wealth, right alongside devastating poverty; in the midst of all of the racial separation that so characterizes our lives, that characterizes congregations to such a great extent, what would it look like for a congregation to live from love, to live with love, to be known in our wider community as a congregation of love? What would it look like to be known as a congregation of prayer, humility, compassion, solidarity with the pain of the world? Our congregational WHY statement points the way for us, that Lewinsville exists to “love and serve God by responding to human need.” What does it look like, during this turbulent time, to embody that statement in every single thing we do?

“Beloved, let us love one another,” 1 John 4:7 instructs us. The text then goes on to say that love is not just a nice thing to do, but that love is definitional for God. “Whoever does not love does not know God.” Let that sink in for a moment. All of the religious training in the world, all of the academic prowess that you might accumulate to help you talk about God in splendid ways, can apparently lead you down an entirely dead end if it does not lead you into a life of love. Why? “Because God is love.” Love is the axis around which God revolves.

Part of our confusion around living with love has to do with language. We use the word “love” to tell our children and our spouses that we love them. But we use the

same word "love" to declare that we love chicken tacos. Can we possibly be talking about the same thing? Whereas our English language uses a single word to carry all of this meaning, the Greek language has at least *four* words. Greek has one word for the love of friendship, another word for the love of affection and fondness, another word for romantic love, and a fourth word for unconditional love, such as the love that God has for the world through Jesus Christ. It is this fourth type of love, *agape* love, that resounds throughout 1 John 4. Let us agape one another, because agape is from God; everyone who agapes is born of God and knows God. Whoever does not agape does not know God, for God is agape.

Recently, I heard a wise pastor say that often, when he gives a wedding homily about love, he would tell the couple that for the rest of their lives, what they will be saying to each other, over and over and over, in many different ways, is "I am so happy that you exist." To love someone is to say to them, in many different ways, "I am so happy that you exist." This was so helpful to me. This is not all that love means, but this kind of pleasure and joy in the existence of the other is surely at the heart of what it means to love. It is what God says about each one of us: "I am so happy that you exist." Can you hear God saying that about you? Can we say this to our spouses? Can we say this to our children? "I am so happy that you exist." Can we say this to other members of the congregation? Can we say this to our neighbors? Can we say this to our enemies, to those who trouble us in some way? Can we say this to animals, to trees, to the waters, to the air? "I am so happy that you exist." How does saying that change the way we relate to these others?

In John 15 Jesus says, "I am the vine, and you are the branches." As Charlie Mendenhall has helped many of us to understand, Jesus' "I am" statements in the Gospel of John are powerful articulations of who he is. There are 7 "I am" statements throughout John's Gospel – a biblically symbolic number – and ours today is the 7th, in some ways, the culminating saying: "I am the vine, and you are the branches."

This saying of Jesus comes in the midst of what is often called Jesus' Farewell Discourse in John's Gospel. Chapters 13-17 are Jesus' final words to his disciples before his betrayal, arrest, trial, and crucifixion. As such, there is an undercurrent of grief, confusion, anxiety, and fear to these chapters. The anxiety is palpable among the disciples, as Thomas says in chapter 14, "Lord, we don't know where you're going. How can we know the way?" It is to this kind of distress that Jesus speaks the words of chapter 15. As he is about to be taken from them by the powers of the world, Jesus tells them that they will not lose their connection with him. In fact, their connection with him is going to grow even stronger and deeper and more intimate. Their relationship to him will not be severed; it is going to be strengthened. "Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit."

Christ grows people, and congregations, of *agape* love. Christ is the vine; we are the branches. As he is, so will we be. When his love flows in us, we will love as he

loves. The more we nurture our connection to Christ, the more *agape* love will come forth from us, just as healthy fruit comes from a healthy vine.

What would it look like for Lewinsville Presbyterian Church to live in the Washington, DC, area from *agape* love? What would that look like in our Christian education ministry, what would that look like in our music ministry, what would that look like in our care for each other, in our service to the needs and the pain of our county? That fruit, that agape fruit, can only be grown from our relationships with Christ. We cannot rush it, we cannot force it, we cannot fake it. But as we sink our roots deeper and deeper into Christ, what will happen is that we will be transformed from the inside out, and we will bear the fruits of prayer, the fruits of humility, the fruits of compassion, the fruits of standing with those who are hurting. To God and to God alone be all the glory, now and forever. Amen.