

“Love One Another”
John 15:12-17 NRSV)

John R. Claypool, in his book, The Preaching Event, tells a story about identical twin boys:

The boys’ lives [were] inseparably intertwined. From the first they dressed alike, went to the same schools, did all the same things. In fact, they were so close that neither ever married, but they came back and took over the running of the family business when their father died. Their relationship to each other was pointed to as a model of creative collaboration.

One morning a customer came into the store and made a small purchase. The brother who waited on him put the five-dollar bill on top of the cash register and walked to the door with the man. Some time later, he remembered what he’d done, but when he went to the cash register, he found the five bucks gone. He asked his brother if he’d seen the bill and put it into the register, and the brother replied that he knew nothing of the bill in question. “That’s funny,” said the other, “I distinctly remember placing the bill here on the register, and no one else has been in the store since then.”

Had the matter been dropped at that point – a mystery involving a little bit of money – nothing would’ve come of it. However, an hour later, this time with a noticeable hint of suspicion in his voice, the brother asked again, “Are you sure you didn’t see the five dollars and put it into the register?” The other brother was quick to catch the note of accusation and flared back in defensive anger.

This was the beginning of the first serious breach of trust that had ever come between these two. It grew wider and wider. Every time they tried to discuss the issue, new charges and countercharges got mixed into the brew until, finally, things got so bad they were forced to dissolve their partnership. They ran a partition down the middle of their father’s store and turned what had been a harmonious and thriving partnership into an angry, adversarial competition. In fact, the business became a source of division in the whole community, each twin trying to enlist allies for himself against the other. This

warfare went on for more than twenty years. Needless to say it didn't help business either.

Then, one day, a car with an out-of-[province] license parked in front of the store. A well-dressed man got out, went into one of the [stores that were side by side] and inquired how long the merchant had been in business in that location. When the man learned that it was more than twenty years, the stranger said, "Then you are the one I must settle an old score." He added, "Some twenty years ago, I was out of work, drifting from place to place, and I happened to get off a [railroad] box car in your town. I had absolutely no money and had not eaten for three days. As I was walking down the alley behind your store, I looked in [the open back] door and saw a five-dollar bill on top of the cash register. Everyone else was in the front of the store. I'd been raised in a Christian home and I'd never in all my life stolen anything, but that morning I was so hungry, I gave in to the temptation, slipped through the door, and took that five dollar bill. The act has weighed on my conscience ever since, and I finally decided that I'd never be at peace until I came back and faced up to that old sin and made amends. Would you let me now replace that money and pay you whatever is appropriate for damages?"

The stranger was surprised to see the old man shaking his head in dismay and beginning to weep. When the brother had gotten control of himself, he took the stranger by the arm and said, "I want you to go next door and repeat the same story you have told me." The stranger did, only this time there were two old men, who looked remarkably alike, both weeping....

From this dramatic true story, we can learn several obvious lessons, including how **mistrust can poison a relationship** and how **friendship can be destroyed by suppositions that have no basis in fact**.

This kind of story is not at all that far-fetched. **We also had some money stolen from us, last week**, out of my office, between the beginning and the end of the second service. Six hundred dollars collected by our young people for Emmanuel, their sponsorship student in Rwanda, and placed on my desk for safe-keeping until the offering was to be counted, but with the doors left unlocked, it disappeared. Several saw a stranger, a woman, smiling, leaving the church west door just after the second service had

begun, but, of course they had no inkling of what she'd probably just done. I have no idea if she will ever return to make amends. Experience tells me it is unlikely. But I know we're all upset it happened. It might be easy to lay blame as to why this happened. Clearly, we are all going to have to increase our security awareness and arrangements.

But the truth that struck me when I first heard Claypool's story was less obvious. It can be as true of Christians as of unbelievers. Many of us here know **Christians, perhaps even members of the same family or the same church who haven't spoken to each other for years** over things like that.

John 15:12-17 focuses on **the friendship and love** that is to exist among the branches of the vine, among believers. Actually, all of chapter 15 is concerned with **believers' relationships**. Verses 1-11 have to do with the relationship between the vine and the branches, between Christ and his followers. Verses 12-17 are about the relationship of branch to branch, or believer to believer. And verses 18-27 are about the relationship of the vine and the branches to the world in which they find themselves.

Of course, the importance of friendship and love between believers is not confined to outrageous situations. Hundreds in the body of Christ are **lonely and anxious for friendship**. Friendship is the number one reason people why come to and stay (or do not stay) in a church. **Craig W. Ellison**, in his book, Loneliness, the Search for Intimacy (1980), says,

Loneliness seems to have flooded the lives of millions of [North] Americans. It's an emotional epidemic. A recent survey of over 40,000 respondents of all ages found that 67 per cent of them felt lonely some of the time. Another survey found that over 64 per cent of widows over age 50 in several urban areas mentioned loneliness as a significant problem in their lives (p. 17).

Some Christians would give anything for a good friend. Friendship is important. The principles in John 15:12-17 apply to everyone – to those who have good friends and those who feel they do not, to the outgoing and the shy, because the principles govern the initiation, the reception, and the maintenance of friendship. And as friendship develops, these principles can take us into deeper and deeper, endlessly satisfying relationships.

1. **A principle that promotes friendship** (John 15:12-13).

In verses 12-13 we find **the principle of sacrifice** in friendship. “This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. No one has greater love than this, to lay down one’s life for one’s friends” (Jn. 15:12-13). Sacrifice is essential to real love. Lovers and lifelong friends know this. Mothers and fathers know this. Even children and young people, young and inexperienced as they are, paying attention to what nurtures them as they grow up, come to know this principle early in life.

Sacrifice was the essential raison d’être of Jesus Christ’s own life.

Verses 12-13 are but a restatement of the “new commandment” that Jesus gave his disciples in the Upper Room in his intimate conversations with them before he made his way to the cross. There he told them, “I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another” (Jn. 13:34-35).

The idea of sacrifice is found in the repeated phrase, “**as I have loved you.**” Jesus Christ loved us so much he gave his life for us. The “**old commandment**” was to love God with everything in our being, and our neighbours as ourselves (Mk. 12:29-31; Matt. 22:37-38). Luke’s additional story of the good Samaritan was our Lord’s great explanation of that kind of love (Lk. 10:25-37). But the “**new commandment**” requires us to love as Jesus loved. From now on, his sacrifice was to be our model. Jesus Christ calls for sacrificial love in his church community.

Our Lord exemplified this **even before the cross**. Just before he gave this new commandment to his disciples he tried every way he knew to restore Judas, to call him to change his mind, even though he also knew Judas was bent on betraying him. He seated Judas next to him, the place of honour. He dipped a morsel of bread into the wine and offered it to Judas, a tried and true custom offering friendship to another. Jesus Christ was offering restoration to Judas. But, sadly, he refused. Nevertheless, from then on, it was clear that sacrifice would be the essential characteristic of love between believers, in imitation of his love for us.

A story from the early life of **E. Stanley Jones**, later to become a world missionary statesman, gives us a beautiful example of this principle of sacrifice. It occurred when he was preaching his first service among the mountain people of Kentucky, very poor but beautiful people.

The meetings were held in the schoolhouse beside the teacherage. After the service, Jones writes,

I was invited to stay with the teacher, a man and his wife, and when I arrived I saw that there was one bed. The husband said, “You take the far side.” Then he got in, and then his wife. In the morning we reversed the process. I turned my face to the wall as they dressed, and they stepped out while I got dressed. [Then we ate together.] That was real hospitality! I have slept in palaces, but the hospitality of that one-bed home is the most memorable and the most appreciated.

(Song of Ascents, 1979, p. 129-130)

I suppose those of us who have grown up in this, one of the most materially blessed eras in history, will not understand this rather homely story, but those who remember having experienced the “dirty thirties” following the Great Depression or the poor and rather humble circumstances of early immigrant days in Canada will know exactly what this story means. Sacrificial people always look after each other.

There are many ways in which we can practice sacrifice. Families and friendship and church community all thrive on sacrifice. In this rather self-absorbed day and age, there isn’t enough of it in God’s family. Let us cultivate a sacrificial spirit and consciously work at being sacrificial givers.

2. **The principle of mutuality in friendship** (John 15:14-15).

Jesus’ words in verse 14, “You are my friends if you do what I commend you,” may speak of obedience, but they also suggest **a mutuality of heart**, the second principle of friendship and love. It’s more than law and obedience. Jesus’ friends obey him because they share the same outlook and goals. Friendship commands reciprocation. Close friends agree in heart and mind and soul and they love to do things for each other. They may sometimes disagree, but the aim of their hearts and lives is one.

Lucy Maud Montgomery’s red-haired and freckle-faced Anne of Green Gables spoke of “**kindred spirits.**” We think “**soul brothers**” is a pop term from the 1960s, but actually the concept is well over 2,000 years old! The Bible talks about a friendship of the soul. Paul describes his relationship with Timothy as being “**one souled**” (Php. 2:19-20). And before him David

and Jonathan's friendship was described as being of "**one spirit**" (1 Sam. 18:1). This is how Christians are to be in friendship with one another.

Verse 15 tells us that this mutuality of heart is ennobled and promoted by the **mutual sharing of personal information**: "I 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" (15:15). I don't have to tell you that the slaves of Jesus' day hardly merited special attention, let alone concern. They were objects to be used whenever it was convenient. But with Christian brothers and sisters, no matter what our status – we are the Lord's servants together -- we frequently let each other into each other's thinking and planning. And we find occasions to share important secrets. In genuine spiritual friendship, while there may be different levels of responsibility, there will be no artificial or spiritual barriers.

We all need close friends who can objectify our thoughts. We need the healing that so often comes when we reveal our deepest feelings to one another without the fear that our confidence will be broken. We need to take time to talk about one another's goals, to pray about one another's dreams and needs, and to share and encourage one another along the way.

3. **The principle of promotion** (John 10:16).

Further, we see **the principle of promotion** in friendship and love in verse 16: "You 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" (10:16). In this verse we see our Lord's desire to help his disciples, now his friends, succeed. He was committed to their fulfilling the ultimate in their calling. Friends rejoice in each other's success.

We don't always feel like a success. I wonder how **Susan Boyle**, a 46-year-old woman, who seemed rather small and chubby, and who had rather homely facial features, with unruly teeth and unkempt hair, and who had told the host ahead of time that she was unemployed, single and had never been kissed felt like when she first came on stage to sing on Britain's hugely popular "Got Talent" show a few weeks ago? And then when she sang – wonderfully, powerfully, wow, how people's perceptions changed!

Chuck Swindoll once asked,

Do you ever feel like a frog? Frogs feel slow and low, ugly and putty, drooped and pooped. I know. One told me. The frog feeling comes to you when you want to be bright but you are dumb. When you want to share but you are selfish. When you want to be thankful, but you are filled with resentment. When you want to be great, but you are small. When you want to care, but you are indifferent. Yes, at one time or another each of us has found himself [or herself] on a lily pad, floating down the great river of life, frightened and disgusted, but too frightened to move.

We all know **how the fairy tale goes**: “Once upon a time” there was a frog, except that he wasn’t really a frog. He was a prince. He only looked and felt like a frog. The wicked witch had cast a spell upon him, and only the kiss of a beautiful maiden could save him. (Since when do cute girls kiss frogs?!) So there he sat – an un-kissed prince in frog form. But miracles do happen, and one day a beautiful maiden gave him a great big smack! Crash! Boom! Zap! Suddenly, he was a handsome prince again. And, of course, they lived happily ever after.

This is what lovers do for their lovers, this is what friends do for their friends, this is what parents do for their children. And this is what the church community does. What is the task of the church? Kissing frogs, and allowing ourselves to be kissed. The principle of promotion is to make each other beautiful.

Many branches within the body of Christ have never reached their potential because **no one ever encouraged them**. Others would reach unimaginable heights if only someone would say, “You know, you’re something.” No one has prayed for them, befriended them, or affirmed them. But we are called to do just that. That is the principle of promotion.

The Lord did not make the principles of sacrifice, mutuality and promotion optional. These essential principles are framed by verses 12 and 17: “This is my commandment, that you love one another....” and “I am giving these commands so that you may love one another” (15:12, 17). Well might we react and say, “Why does he command the impossible? Love is a strong and uncontrollable emotion. You cannot command it.” But the answer is found in understanding that the word our Lord uses here for love is “agape.” This is the love that has loved us with an everlasting love. This is the love which enables us to forgive because we have been forgiven.

This is the love that is present when Christ is present. When we are deeply in love with Jesus Christ all sorts of good things are possible. We will love all kinds and conditions of people. We can even love the unlovely. Above all, we will develop loving relationships with one another. **When our relationship with God in Christ is everything it ought to be, it is remarkable how loving we can be!**

Amen

The Rev. Dr. J. H. (Hans) Kouwenberg
Abbotsford, BC
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