

“Love is Dangerous” based on John 15:9-17 and Psalm 98

Delivered by Pastor Drew Mangione on May 5, 2024, at Shelby Presbyterian Church

What a joy it is to be a part of this service this morning, to see these children, serving as leaders in the life of the church, even as they are still growing in their faith in Jesus. In our liturgical tradition, we offer you and every child a chance each week, not just to attend a service as a spectator, but to participate, in word and deed.

We do so through prayers and responses and songs, and in deeds, in our giving, such as to the little ones who collected today’s Five-Cents-A-Meal donations. It is intentional that all of you, from children to the eldest, are all given the opportunity to actively participate, with your heart, mind, soul, and body.

Next week, it will be some of our middle and high school aged students up here. Again, they will be leading you in the active participation in the life of the church. Each of these children and youth are important and valued by this church. This is not because of their potential as future generations of members, but because of who they are right now, made in God’s image, and called to be a part of the body of Christ, the church. Each of us adults should value our roles to help mold and shape these young people, but we must also recognize these young people mold and shape us too. And we have much to learn from them, after all Jesus said we must have faith like children – their trust.

With our modern access to information from across the world at our fingertips always, it is easy for us to feel like the world is a dangerous and frightening place. Yet, I say with confidence that I would rather be a parent now in the 2020s, than be raising children in any decade or era before.

I say this even as I look out at a future of fights over cell phones. I say this knowing this means giving access to the internet, and I worry, “How are my sweet precious children going to handle it?” Every cell phone gives a child access to the world, all of it – every single part – instantly. It’s like we hand them this device and say, ok, you’re an adult now. Here’s everything.

We do this because we feel pressure – everyone else is doing it, and we don’t want our kids to get that feeling of being left out, of being marginalized, of being different. We know that certain parts of the world will judge us and our kids and exclude them, and so we hand them the full power of all human knowledge in a phone. We say, “Hey, you can handle all this,” but you can’t handle rejection. We do this only to find that with social media and artificial intelligence, bots, and all that stuff, there are new and more creative ways to be rejected than any of us had to deal with even 40, 30, or even 20 years ago. My thoughts are not meant to judge anyone, but only to share my own fears, worries and concerns for my children and yours – all of our children.

And yet, you may be wondering how I could say that I’d rather be a parent right now, when no other time in history has faced these challenges. I say this because I have seen that in today’s world, in every culture worldwide, children have more rights, more value, and better protections than ever. Yes, even in the worst places for children in our modern world, conditions continue to improve, even if still far too slowly. Yet conditions in the worst spots may be better the conditions than for most children, even middle to upper class kids even than just 150 years ago.

You see, it was only 150 years ago that the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children, was founded in New York City, in response to the first ever prosecuted trial for child abuse in 1874. The

SPCA for animals was founded 10 years earlier in New York and 50 years earlier in England, but we finally got around to kids in 1874. In fact, the conviction was garnered on the grounds that what was inhumane to animals should certainly be considered inhumane to children. But for most of our human history, unfortunately, children were treated as property. So I love that you guys are who you are, whom we love for who you are.

For all of us, if 150 years ago was so different from today, imagine when the texts we read today were written. The Psalm may be 3,000 years old, and the writing from John more than 1,900 years old. We live in a world today that thankfully has been influenced by these texts and all of scripture to the point that we miss the radical nature of what is being said in them. We probably struggle to imagine that crimes we consider horrific, even the most horrific, were allowed or at best, ignored, only just a couple centuries ago. So to imagine two millennia ago, it becomes all the more difficult for us to conceive.

When we hear Jesus's command to love, we hear this from our Christianized worldview. I don't mean a church worldview. I don't mean a worldview we have because we are Christians, but a worldview so influenced by Christianity, that at this point Christianity itself is judged by nonbelievers by its own standards. That's a good thing because it causes us to re-evaluate and get back to who we really are.

You don't have to be a Christian to believe that children are not property, but valued members of our culture, who deserve dignity and respect. Yet, in the Roman world, when a child was born the father inspected it. If it wasn't disabled or the wrong gender or unfit in any way, he would keep it, or otherwise leave it outside for the animals or for slave traders. The first Christians went around and listened for the screams of childbirth and went to pick up those exposed children to take them and care for them and raise them with dignity.

Hearing the command of Jesus to "let the children come to me," and as believers, who saw themselves as in Christ, and indwelt by the Holy Spirit, took this command as an imperative to give every child an opportunity. This is what it means to abide and remain in Jesus as he abides and remains in the Father. It is to remain with him, in good times and in bad, and live as if connected directly to him, guided by him to bear fruit to love others as he loves us. This means even laying down our lives for others.

The Roman world did not value love – they valued *dignitas*, or honor, above all else. This was achieved through their exceptionalism, especially in battle, in wealth, and in divine favor. Early in the Rome's history, they defeated the rival empire of Carthage, doing so by coming back after defeat. They came back and came back. The Carthaginians felt they could never get Rome to stop because they always sought the honor of victory no matter what. Then, to take the power of shame, the Romans stole the Carthaginian practice of crucifixion as their own.

For the Roman way, *dignitas* was zero sum game – to gain honor, someone else had to be shamed. What's more, the gods were the same way, so every relationship was a transaction. If you wanted honor bestowed by Jupiter or Aries, you had to earn it by honoring them. This was the way of the sacrificial system and the pantheon of pagan gods. The pagan gods also competed for honor, so you could pit one god against another, increasing the honor of one in victory and heaping the shame of defeat upon the other. They had a saying, "do ut des," which means, "I give so you will give."

But for the people of Israel and the followers of Jesus, this is not the way of their God. The true God is different. In the Psalm, we read of Israel proclaiming the promise of love and loyalty, the *chesed* we talked about last week. Yet, in Rome, to talk of their gods having love and loyalty for people in general was dangerous and blasphemous because it was beneath their honor. In the tales of Greek and Roman gods, they might fall in erotic love and father a child to whom they remained loyal but the idea of *chesed* or *agape* toward humans with covenant faithful and merciful love that always pursues the beloved for the sake of the beloved – that was dangerous.

This kind of love upset the power structure and hierarchy of the Roman system, which required that love and pursuit always flow upward toward the nobles, toward the emperor, toward the gods, and any benefit to the lower people would come back down, from their abundance in return.

But the God of Israel pursued Abraham and promised him blessings up front. The God of Israel pursued Jacob, despite every time he messed up. The God of Israel freed the people from Egypt, not because they earned it, or were keeping the faith in Egypt, or even that they really asked for it, but simply because they suffered, and God heard their cry.

This was bizarre enough to the Romans, but now Jesus took this one step further. Israel's God emptied himself, taking the shameful form of a slave in human likeness, but did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited. Instead, this God was humbled, made low, and became obedient even to death on a cross – the most shameful of all deaths. For Rome, humans could become gods, ascending – the emperors did that, as did Hercules. Gods could descend to exploit humanity, but the idea of a god descending into shame for the sake of others, was dangerous.

If a god would do this, then this could be expected of human rulers and maybe everyone should be equal under the law from the emperor to the lowest. That's dangerous to the powers. Yet, Jesus says that "in the same way the Father has loved me, so I love you." The love of God is humble, loyal, and faithful, empowering to the lowly. It empowers us all to love.

One of the criticisms of Rome against Christianity in those early years was that they raised the status of the unskilled, the enslaved, the women and children. How dare they? They included them in their ranks, their rites, and rituals. That's what Rome disliked about Christianity. Yet, it is the power of the incarnation and atonement that makes Christianity amazing. Our faith is that in order to be at one with us, God came to us, sending the eternal Son to share in our life, our limits, and dying for us, rising for us, and ascending for us to give us the Holy Spirit that empowers us to do the same.

Beloved, to abide – or remain – in Jesus as he abides – or remains – in the Father is to recognize and secure our attachment to Jesus in every aspect of our life. While I love how in our modern times, our world has been Christianized, the leveling of divisions, the raising of status for children and women, ending the division among nations – these are all good things.

But if this is done without abiding, or remaining in Christ, we lose connection of our branch to the vine, we see Rome's way rising again. We already see this in the church, where some theologies have set aside orthodoxy, whether by relegating Jesus to just a teacher, or as the ticket to personal prosperity, or as hierarchically lower than God the Father, who is an angry supreme deity that needs appeasement at all times. You see, when we separate Jesus from the Father or separate ourselves from Jesus, we leave room for the Roman *dignitas* to take over our lives.

We see this in the prevalence of blaming the poor, of online shaming and cancel culture, of the battles over ideological purity. and the complete lack of humility in our culture, where we think all of history points to us. We do this whether it is the secular world saying we are at the progress of our species and we will continue to progress, or when some think the scripture is really all about us right now in this time. You're so vain, you probably think this verse is about you.

Sisters and brothers, Jesus commanded us to love and abide with him as he is in the Father, in order that we might have joy, and that this joy would fill us up. This is not so that we can be happy all the time, which is different from joy. Joy comes from knowing God is in control, and that the Lord is our friend, and that the Spirit is with us. We might not fear anything, even laying down our lives. And if we do not fear even laying down our lives for love, then surely we need not fear shame, embarrassment, or human division on behalf of our God. We are chosen and appointed to bear fruit – to grow the Kingdom of God and draw that circle wide, as the children sang, and wider still.

I know the world out there has plenty of challenges. No matter how much has changed for the better, it's still a mess. And so often, things we humans do, thinking we mean well, cause all kinds of problems. But right now, something I usually say at the start of every service, I have reserved for now because I want to bring you little ones back into sermon.

You need to know that the Lord your God loves you. God loves you first. You don't have to be a winner. You don't have to do something great to receive God's love. No, God loves you just the way you are. God desires you to grow every day and know your blessings – which are the things in your life that bring you closer to God. Because that's how much God loves you. Trust God, because God chooses you.

What would the world look like if all of us really took that to heart? What if we were truly filled with joy to participate as Christ's body not just here in church services but out in the world around us? If we live in Christ's love, then we would live in a love that is dangerous to the way this world wants to be. But look at the marvelous things that can happen. Look at the marvelous things that God has done to make this world a better place already and continue until all things are made new in Christ our Lord. Amen.