**Because Jesus**

**John 15:9-15**

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 Over the years that I have been here at this church, I’ve heard about an end-of-year game that the children’s ministry puts together called “Are you smarter than a sixth-grader?” It’s basically a fun way to review Bible stories and to celebrate the sixth graders as they move out of the children’s program and into the youth program. Now, last week was the youth end-of-year banquet, affectionately called The Academy Awards, and we played “Are you smarter than a 12th grader?” So, congregation, today I bring to you – “Are you smarter than an 8th grader?” And I wish you luck because this is a very smart group sitting in the front pews.

 But first, a little background. Last Sunday, while you all were in worship, I was meeting with our Confirmands. For two years, these seventeen young people have been in our Explorers class learning about theology and United Methodism and church history and different denominations and different faiths - all sorts of things - because we wanted them to make a thoughtful decision about whether to be confirmed. The last session is about the Confirmation vows, so I was talking with them about the questions they will answer today and what they mean.

 We had just been discussing the last vow – the promise to support the church with your prayers, your presence, your gifts, your service, and your witness, when I asked them my favorite question. “Why? Why do we promise to do all these things?” So, congregation, there’s the question to see if you are smarter than an 8th grader. “Why? Why do we promise to do these things?”

 Now, I have to be honest and say this is something of a bait and switch. If this were a real game, you would tell me your answer right now, but with 300 people in the congregation, that just doesn’t seem practical. I would love to hear from you, though, so send me an email and tell me why. Why do we profess our faith? Why do we become members of the church? Why do we promise our prayers, presence, gifts, service and witness? For now, though, back to the story…So, I asked them this question, “Why?” and there was a long pause until Grace Nelson said, “Because…well, because Jesus.”

 And there it was – Grace had just given me what could be the most concise and indisputable answer in Christian theology. I was reminded of sitting in a theology class in seminary when the professor jokingly said, “If you ever don’t know the answer, just say Jesus.”

 So, Confirmands, if you don’t remember anything else from these two years of Explorers class, remember that – because Jesus. Or, another way of saying the same thing, because love. Our faith and everything we do in the church really is all about love – loving God, loving your neighbor, and claiming God’s love for you**.** That is what Jesus came to teach us, to show us, and the commandment he gave to us.

 It’s right there in the scripture reading we just heard from the Gospel of John when Jesus says to the disciples, “This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you.” So, if the journey of faith really comes down to Jesus – to loving as Jesus loved – we need to know what that means. How did Jesus love? What did Jesus do that we’re supposed to do, too?

 Perhaps the most obvious thing is that Jesus loved with compassion. As he traveled with his disciples, he met people who were hurting all the time. Sometimes their hurt was physical; sometimes it was emotional or even spiritual. No matter what their circumstances, Jesus spoke with them with compassion and treated them with respect and dignity. It happens in our lives every day. We encounter someone who is in pain. The kid who is being bullied at school. The homeless person asking for money on the street. The girl who is cutting herself. The friend who confides that he is depressed. Every day we encounter these people in pain, and every day we have a choice whether to walk past them, ignore them, change the subject OR to stop and listen, offer help, engage them with compassion.

 Of course, Jesus also loved by accepting people exactly as they are. No one was outside the circle of his love. Jesus loved his disciples – they were his friends and his students. But, he also loved prostitutes and criminals and strangers – people who are sometimes hard to love. He loved them by accepting them, serving them, welcoming them, and including them. We, too, have people in our lives and in our world that are hard to love. People who look different or have different beliefs or are just plain annoying. We want them to change, to be more like we are – or at least to be less of who they are. But, what we learn from Jesus is that loving means accepting people with their differences - their strengths and their weaknesses. And that includes loving ourselves, seeing ourselves with the same warmth and compassion with which Jesus would see us.

 This leads to another characteristic of Jesus and his love. Jesus loves with forgiveness. He forgave the disciples for all the mistakes they made. He forgave Zaccheus for his cruelty to the Jewish people. He even forgave the people who crucified him.

 This means, if Jesus could be that forgiving, you know he is forgiving of you, as well. That’s a lot what grace is about – that no matter what we do, we’re not stuck in our mistakes. God loves us and is waiting to forgive us and help us get back on the right path. And that’s often what people mean when they call Jesus our savior. The word salvation means “to be made whole”. When we make mistakes, we hurt or break ourselves or others. And other people’s mistakes hurt us. Jesus saves us, in part, by showing us that nothing we can do, even crucifying someone, is beyond God’s forgiveness. When we believe in that forgiveness, we can let go of the past, and God’s love and grace make us whole again.

 Of course, that means if we are going to be like Jesus, then we are called to love with forgiveness, too, and that might be the most challenging thing about being a Jesus-follower. Forgiving can be really hard, but forgiving also makes us free – free of resentment and anger and hate and all the things that take the joy out of life.

 There’s one more thing about Jesus – he didn’t only feel love for others, he put love into action. He didn’t just say “I love you”. He looked at the people around him and found out what they needed, and then he helped. If someone was hungry, he offered them food. If someone was being mistreated, he stood up for them. If someone was hurting, he healed them.

 So, there we go. Love because Jesus loved -seems simple enough. We all know how to love, right? But some of these things we learn about love from Jesus are not simple at all. How do we find the inner strength to accept people who frighten or anger us? To forgive people who hurt us? To make love be the starting point of every encounter we have?

 Again, Jesus tells us in his words to the disciples that we heard earlier. “Abide in my love”. Abide is an old word and one we don’t use much anymore. Most often, you hear it used meaning something like obey – like, he abides by the rules of the court. But, an older meaning of the word is to dwell – like, she abides in a home on Fifth Street. That’s where we get the word abode.

 So, how do we get this strength to love like Jesus? We dwell in his love for us. We let his love – compassionate, non-judgmental, accepting, and forgiving – surround us and fill us. We trust that we are lovable because Jesus loves us. And when we believe that we are loved, it’s so much easier to love others.

 Which leads to the last thing we learn from what Jesus said to the disciples when he commanded them, and us, to love as he loved them. He says, “I appointed you to bear fruit, fruit that will last…” When we love as Jesus loved, with compassion and acceptance and forgiveness, when we put our love into action, other people will not only be moved and grateful for our love but will want to love that way, too. That’s what it means to bear fruit. Our love sows the seeds of love in others so that they, too, choose love over hate, compassion over judgment, forgiveness over condemnation.

 We all live every day in a world in need, a world where so many people are hurting, scared, alone, hungry, homeless, mistreated. As members of God’s family, we have something to offer them that is more powerful than any other force in the world – God’s love, real love, love that can both help individuals and transform the world. So, disciples of Christ, whether you are newly confirmed or life-long members, go out into this messy, complicated, beautiful world we live in, go out this day and every day, and be love, act out love, do love – because, well, because Jesus.

 May it be so. Amen.