

Our Values: Love Boldly!

1 John 4:16-18

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Today is our fall ReConnect event - our annual kick off to a new program year! My hope for this event is always for everyone to be outside enjoying the sunshine and blue sky of a perfect fall day. Unfortunately, that's just not meant to be this year. The weather just isn't cooperating with us. But never mind. The purpose of this event is to be with each other, connect with friends we haven't seen in a while, learn about ways to serve our church and community, eat some good food, and just generally have a good time! We can certainly do all of that inside as well as outside!

This is also the time of year when I try to cast a vision for us as a church - something that draws us together in a common understanding of our faith in action. Last week, we talked about how Christianity is a faith tradition that honors the past even as it focuses on the future - particularly the future fulfillment of God's reign of love. As individuals and a church, we have an important part to play in growing God's reign, so starting today, we are going to spend a few weeks looking at how we do that as we explore FUMC's values - love boldly, live curiously, and serve compassionately.

So, let's start with love boldly. What does that actually mean? We use the word love all the time for many different things. We love our family members and our friends, the people we are closest to. But we also love ice cream and flowers and U of M football. We love a good book or a long nap on a rainy Sunday afternoon. We use the word "love" for anyone or anything for which we feel deep affection.

Yet, "bold love" is something bigger. In scripture, to love boldly is to love with confidence, courage, conviction, and freedom, especially in the face of fear or opposition. Bold love is unconditional, relational, and characterized by grace, transformation, justice, and compassion. It is the love we see in Jesus Christ, and it begins with God's love for us.

The first chapter of Genesis tells us that we are made in God's image. Therefore, from the time we are born, we have the capacity to love as God does. Yet, we quickly learn to doubt and fear, hate and judge. Those feelings lead us to be unkind, even cruel, and often destructive - behaving in ways far different from what Jesus showed us. Still, God longs to be in relationship with us and so readily forgives our mistakes and blunders, our unkind thoughts, our unChristlike behavior and continuously gives us opportunities to try again.

But God doesn't stop there. Our sins forgiven, God enters our hearts and goes about the work of transforming us back into the compassionate and just people God created us to be. Through unconditional love and unmerited grace, God transforms our motives, attitudes, and desires. We become people who seek to follow the Greatest Commandments - to love God and to love our neighbors as ourselves.

In his book "Our Purpose Is To Love: A Wesleyan Way to be the Church", David N. Field writes that John Wesley, the founder of Methodism, described a Christian as one for whom love is

the central motivating and directing influence in their life. “A Christian is one whose character is shaped by love from the inside out. Love then shapes our attitudes, our desires, our emotional responses, our expectations, and our hopes.”

First John 4 tells us, “we have known and believe the love that God has for us. God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them.” In other words, God’s love finds its home in our hearts, and we find our home in God who is love. First John then goes on to say, “Love has been perfected among us in this: that we may have boldness on the day of judgment, because as he is, so are we in this world.”

This transformative work of God, the God who is love, is what prepares us to be in this world as God is and to love boldly. Our love is expressed in our actions. We begin to advocate and care for those who have less than we do, those who are unable to advocate for themselves, those who have been pushed to the margins, those who have been labeled and demeaned. Wesley believed that our love, expressed through acts of mercy and justice, would then transform the world until God’s kin-dom is fully realized.

In describing bold love, the United Methodist Board of Discipleship points out that Jesus’ love was not safe or sweet. It was not passive or sentimental. Jesus’ love was bold and disruptive. When he gives the new commandment that we love as he loves us, he “invites us into that same radical, risk-taking love”. His is love that shows up where people are hurting, that recognizes the forces of empire that oppose it, that rejects the idea of scarcity, which moves us closer to God and God’s reign.

From the United Methodist Church website, “To love boldly is to live a gospel that is embodied, enacted, and expressed, even when it’s uncomfortable or inconvenient. It is to live a life shaped not by empire’s demand for control, but by the Spirit’s call to freedom and wholeness for all.” Bold love doesn’t stop at affection or attraction. Bold love seeks wholeness for every person and every living thing in God’s creation. And sometimes that means having a lot of courage. Yet, as we read in First John, “There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear.”

For us as individuals, that might look like: going to a city council meeting and advocating for fair housing or showing up regularly to help out at Alpha House or Habitat or another one of the organizations who will be present at our ReConnect today. Bold love looks like using a trans person’s preferred name and pronouns or deeply considering how the racism in our society has influenced or shaped you. Bold love may even be traveling to someplace unknown to you to help build an orphanage or start a school.

God calls us to put love before anything and everything else - even our fears. Fear tells us to retreat into our tribes. Love says, *Go meet your neighbor*. Fear says, *Only listen to people who already agree with you*. Love says, *Listen to everyone*. Fear says, *Protect yourself*. Love says, *Be vulnerable enough to be known*. Fear says, *That person is different from you*. Love says, *That person is a child of God*. Fear says, *What if I don't know what to say?* Love says, *Show up anyway*. Fear says, *What if I get rejected?* Love says, *You are already held by God*. (This is what makes Christian love bold. Not arrogance. Not certainty. Not volume. Courage.)

Bold love crosses all the lines that divide us. Bold love acts against indifference and injustice. Bold love refuses to meet hostility with hostility. Bold love refuses to stay comfortable.

What does bold love look like in a church? Fields outlines several characteristics of churches that love boldly. He says that they are covenantal communities. In other words, they have a sacred covenant with God and with each other. A promise to be the people God called us to be. Churches that love boldly are welcoming of all people - not just in words but in behavior and attitudes. They are also missional. They serve the world. Boldly loving churches are sacramental. They understand that the sacraments are means of grace through which we encounter God in community and offer ourselves in loving service to God. Churches who are grounded in bold love also value mutual accountability and create opportunities for church folks to share with and support each other. In centering love at the center of the community, churches that love boldly are countercultural. What other organization starts with a mission of loving all people unconditionally and, therefore, goes to the margins of society to find those who are most vulnerable and most in need. Finally, boldly loving churches are connectional and they are transnational.

The good news is our church already has many of these characteristics. Yet, how do we stay focused on love and not get distracted by all the reasons we have to fear? There is a story told about a young white pastor during the civil rights movement who was hesitant to become involved because he was afraid of what might happen. He had a family. He had a congregation. He had a reputation. He knew there were risks. And yet he eventually understood that the question was not simply, "What is safest for me?" The deeper question was: "What does love require of me?"

That question has been asked by Christians in every generation. It was asked by people who sheltered Jews in World War II. It was asked by people who marched for civil rights. It was asked by people who crossed denominational and racial boundaries. It was asked by people who stood beside people with AIDS when others were afraid to even touch them. It has been asked by people who welcome immigrants, defend the vulnerable, challenge injustice, care for prisoners, feed the hungry, and walk with people who have been pushed to the margins.

That is the question we must continuously ask ourselves today. What does love require of us? What does God call us to do? Whom does God call us to love - despite the risks, the distractions, the fear that may hold us back?

May we respond with confidence and courage, curiosity and compassion. May we go out into this divided, messed up, fractured world and love boldly.

Amen.

