**May 10, 2015 *Love One Another* A Sermon for the Sixth Sunday of Easter by The Rev. John M. Barrett**

**WEST CENTER CONGREGATIONAL CHURCH, UCC**

**REMEMBERING OUR MOTHERS AND OTHERS**

In 1914 President Woodrow Wilson issued a proclamation inviting “the people of the United States to display the flag at their homes or other suitable places on the second Sunday in May, as a public expression of our love and reverence for the mothers of our country.”

More than one hundred years later we honor our mothers with calls, cards, flowers, brunches and dinners, and perhaps even by displaying the American flag, as the President intended, not only for our own mother, but for all the mothers of America.

And so in this time and place, our time and place, I invite us to think about and thank our mothers ---and other nurturing people in our lives, in our country and in the world ---- in a spirit of prayer.

Let us pray: O God of all, we thank you this day for your love made known to us by mothers and all those who love and nurture, regardless of their age or gender. We thank our Mothers and Others for their love --- and for doing the best they could for us. May we likewise be inspired to be loving and nurturing, reflecting the love made known to us through our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

**THE GOSPEL WITNESS** John 15:9-7

**SERMON**

Jesus says, “Love one another.”

“This is my commandment that you love one another as I have loved you.”

“I am giving you these commands so that you may love one another.”

“Love one another” seems to be the perfect theme for Mother’s Day, even though Jesus talks about his Father and not his Mother in today’s Gospel, saying: “As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love.”

And just how has God loved Jesus, and how does Jesus love us?

God has loved Jesus, and Jesus loves us with exactly the kind of love we need, and so seldom receive, unconditional, self-giving, forgiving love.

The Greek word for the love of God and Jesus in the Gospel of John is “agape.” The word “agape” never appears in the Gospel of Mark, and only once in the Gospels of Matthew and Luke. However, in the Gospel of John, “agape” occurs seven times, and in the First Letter of John, “agape appears eighteen times.

Agape is an intentional love that demands nothing in return. Although agape love does not demand anything in return, agape is often returned freely, in grateful response. In 1 John, where we read, “God is love,” the love that “God is” is “agape.” And in John 3:16, “For God so loved the world,” God’s love is “agape.”

The agape that God and Jesus have for us is the love that we are to have for each other, as we follow Jesus’ commandment to “Love one another as I have loved you.”

The love that Jesus asks us to give is the love that we have received: love that is intentional, unconditional, self-giving and forgiving.

The love we are to give is intentional, for that is how we are loved by God and by our Lord. Our love is to be deliberate. Being loving is a choice we make. We walk toward people and situations in need, rather than away from them.

Jesus would have us love unconditionally, without any qualifications, without any limits, the way he loves us. Yet sometimes our love must be “tough.” Sometimes we must practice “tough love.”

If we find ourselves enabling destructive behaviors in those whom we love, in order to truly love them and serve them, we may have to cut back financial or other support, so that the beloved is held accountable for their actions, can see the consequences of their behavior, and hopefully can now develop the will to change.

Some say that you have to hit bottom of the well before you can climb out of it. And I think that might well be true. My brother Don hit the bottom, and his self-motivated turnaround was amazing, even inspiring.

As Jesus demonstrates, the essence of love is our own essence, our self, freely shared and forgiving.

When I was wondering how to illustrate self-giving love in our own time, I remembered reading a good example of self-giving love that very morning in The New York Times. The op-ed story, called “The Growing Generational Divide,’ is by a writer named Silas House. (May 8, 2015)

*BEREA, Ky. — I was always with older folks when I was very young. … But it was the stories of my fierce aunt, Sis, that were my favorite. …*

*More than anything else, my aunt told me stories. She knew all the key elements of storytelling: love, mystery, trouble. In her tales there was comedy, tragedy, a man who got his comeuppance, a defiant woman who would not be defeated, a community that ostracized the heroine. She recalled rationing and claimed to remember listening to F.D.R., my childhood hero, on the radio. She brought my long-lost great-grandparents to life.*

*This is the main thing we lose when we don’t talk to our elders: the histories. …*

*Now Aunt Sis is gone, and a universe of stories has gone with her. Fortunately, I had been taught to listen, to be present, and so those stories go on in me and in my daughters, handed down from one generation to another.*

*(*[*Silas House*](http://www.silashouse.org/index.html) *is the author, most recently, of the novel “Same Sun Here,” with Neela Vaswani.)*

And so the self-giving love of Aunt Sis continues with the additions of the new storytellers’ stories of their own.

If we would love as God loves Jesus, and as Jesus loves us, we will tell stories about them, and tell our family and individual stories too. In this self-giving through storytelling, we let ourselves be known, and we come to know better those who are listening to us and who care enough to remember and share their own stories and our stories.

In summary (which are two favorite words of both congregation and preacher), the love that Jesus asks us to give to others is the love that we have received from him: love that is intentional, unconditional, self-giving and finally, and most importantly, love that is forgiving.

Jesus loves us because Jesus can and does forgive us. Jesus forgives us our debts, as we forgive our debtors. Jesus forgives us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us. Jesus forgives us our lies, as we forgive those who lie to us. Jesus forgives us our hurtfulness, as we forgive those who are hurt us.

It all comes down to this: If we can’t forgive one another, we can’t love one another. Jesus comes to us with words of forgiveness, and his death and resurrection make his forgiveness actual.

Jesus’ actions during Holy Week make both his words and his love real. And the same thing is true for us. Rather than only thinking or praying about forgiveness, in the Lord’s Prayer, we are called to actions that make our forgiveness and our love real: “Forgive us, God, as we forgive.”

And how to forgive? We might consider calling or writing a note to someone we are estranged from saying, “In the freshness of spring and the spirit of Eastertide, what do you say we put the past away and start our relationship anew --- today? I miss you (and perhaps you miss me too).”

If the someone we are estranged from has passed away, we can write them a note too, and then set it afire, and let our words travel into the heavens to their recipient.

It’s true, that we can’t make everything right for everyone, but we can try to make some things right for ourselves and for others, to the best of our ability.

And how can we do this? By loving one another as Jesus loves us, and by abiding in his love, dwelling in his love, so that his joy may be in us, and our joy may be complete. Amen.

**HYMN OF RESPONSE** *Jesu, Jesu, Fill Us with Your Love*

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