

“Continue the Work of Jesus: Love People”

Mark 12:31; John 8:1-11

4/18/10

We are in our four week series, focusing on Oakland’s mission statement.

Continue the work of Jesus.

Love God.

Love People.

Celebrate Life.

Pass It Around!

God has given us a clear purpose as His church as we continue the work of Jesus in the world.

Last week we heard the first and greatest commandment, to love God with all our being. We cannot do anything without being intimately connected to the Source of all life and love.

This week Jesus makes clear what is directly tied to that:

Mark 12:31: *“Love your neighbor as yourself.”*

And so this morning we focus on the second part of our mission statement:

We are called to Love People.

So what does that mean?

I had breakfast with someone this past Wednesday, and he began telling me of a time when he was much younger, when, in his words, “I did some things that were not right.”

He went to talk with a pastor about it, and in my friend’s troubled conscience the pastor told him, in a not so gentle way, “You need to get right with Jesus.”

My friend said he went away angry, further from God than when he started.

What does it mean to love people?

There once was a young guy who had long hair and drove a duct-taped together Pontiac. He was trying to figure out who he was as a person called by God to serve the church, not really sure of that and if he should really be in ministry. He went to a church where they accepted him for who he was, helped him grow, built him up instead of simply judging him for surface appearance. They let him make mistakes—plenty of them. And he decided to stay with it. Yes, that was you as Oakland, and here I stand today.

What does it mean to love people? To scold someone with Jesus? Or patience with someone different?

I realize that I could preach for an entire year on love—all the different types of love, what it means to love, why we are called to love, on and on. So we are not going to hit it all this morning.

But as I looked at Scripture, as I looked at Jesus’ example, some attributes of love rise to the surface. And so I tried to sum them up in a way that might help us remember them using the word,

LOVE: Living. Open. Valuing. Everyone. [put on screen all at once just as a visual—we’ll get into each point as we go.]

So how did Jesus love people?

John 8:1-11

Why do I pick this story from all the others I could name? Because this really hits on so many issues we deal with in loving people.

First of all,

Love is Living.

Jesus was out living life in the world. Not secluded.

Love is being alive in Christ and aware of the world around you.

To love you have to live—be out there with people, in the mix. Jesus was on the move, living life, enjoying life with others and involved in the suffering it brings as well.

I think it can be easy for us, as individuals and certainly as the church, to get comfortable and just kind of exist in our own world. We live our daily lives, keep to ourselves, our routines. And I think the biggest issue with that is, not that we are not allowed to have our daily routines, but sometimes that can cause us not to truly see, to truly be aware of what is going on around us with people.

It's a safety thing for us. There is a lot of fear in the world, especially when we talk about people that are truly different from us. But wherever you are as you live—in your neighborhood, at work, in a restaurant, at ballgame, in the store—be aware of those around you. Get to know folks. Greet people with kindness. Stay in tune with what folks are up to, what they need.

Jesus was always getting Himself in trouble for the people He was hanging out with. I have a feeling that Jesus had fun with people. But He was also in the mix, talking, feeling, aware of what people were up to. That's how He found Himself involved in this moment with the woman caught in adultery.

He was living. And He was also open to others.

Love is Open.

Romans 12:9-10, 15-16 says, *“Let love be genuine...love one another with mutual affection...Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep. Live in harmony with one another; do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly; do not claim to be wiser than you are.”*

If you want to love someone, you have to be open and real with them. There's no quicker a turn-off than someone thinking they are better than you. Did you ever experience spiritual arrogance?

Jesus understood why a person was the way they were. He came down to our level as humans. He didn't make excuses for us, just understood why we are the way we are.

Love strives to understand why a person is who they are.

Paul Williams tells a good story about understanding. He says,

“The infernal sound woke me at 5:30. I thought it was a car alarm. When it happened again the next morning, it dawned on me. I had a northern mockingbird outside my window.

“The volume was incredible, twice as loud as any robin, blue jay, or cardinal I've ever heard. I tried earplugs and pulling a pillow over my head, both to no avail. The mockingbird pegged the decibel meter morning after morning.

“I tolerated the bird the first year. The second spring I went to war. I borrowed a BB gun from my secretary. She insisted I take the safety goggles as well.

“Early one Saturday I tiptoed into the backyard, BB gun in hand, and waited by the patio table. I spotted him at about 6:15, sitting on the power line that stretched from the pole to the house. Before I could raise the gun he was gone—hiding in the top of a neighbor's sugar maple. He made a few more runs from the tree to the power line to the roof of the house, but I never had a clear shot. I went inside at about 8:00, equal parts ashamed for wanting to kill the poor bird, and discouraged for being so inept with a BB gun.

“My ambush having proven fruitless, I figured I needed more information. I googled ‘killing mockingbirds’ but all the references were to Harper Lee's book. I knew it was not an instruction manual.

“Then I googled ‘mockingbirds.’ What I found was astounding. A male mockingbird has as many as 200 songs in his repertoire. Males and females build their nest together, and may call on other mockingbirds to protect the nest in the event of attack. The more I read, the more intrigued I became. ‘These are incredibly fascinating birds,’ I told my wife.

“With dripping sarcasm she replied, ‘So, you still need that BB gun?’

“It is amazing how much empathy and understanding a little knowledge can bring.”

Paul Williams, "To Kill a Mockingbird," Christian Standard magazine (8-26-09)

This is huge. So much trouble in our world comes from lack of understanding. I think often we don't take the time or effort to try and get some perspective on who a person is and why. As extreme as a person may seem to us, or even someone who is hurtful, there are reasons why. Not excuses or to say it's all okay, but we are shaped by our life experiences, and we need to take the time to try and understand it.

How many stories I have heard like the one I shared about my friend going to see his pastor, where we just give a pat answer to someone's problems. “Get right with Jesus.” Well, yes, we need to do that. But that means nothing to someone who may have no idea who Jesus even is. They need to see Him in us first.

Jesus was genuine with this woman, real.

Love is genuine in who I am with others.

Jesus was there, real with this woman. Jesus never sinned, but He knew what temptation felt like, and He knew what it felt like to be rejected like she was experiencing.

We all have different experiences in life. I cannot begin to know what you feel like. It would be wrong for me to think I do know. But at the core of all things we all experience common needs—temptation, hurt, acceptance, desire for love. Draw from what you know, simply being one human to another, all in this same boat together.

And be honest.

Love is honest.

Jesus was also honest with the woman—He said, You have sinned, but don't anymore. He was also honest with the crowd, making quite clear that they were all sinners in need of grace.

If I am being honest this morning, being honest is something that I have had to really work at. Not in the sense that I'm a liar, but in truly sharing with someone what is on my heart. Why? Because I don't want to hurt someone's feelings. I am a people pleaser, and so I may not tell someone what they really need to hear, or how they really made me feel by what they did, just to “keep the peace”.

We Brethren are good that that. Sweep it under the carpet until we are all sitting sideways on top of this huge mound in the middle of the room.

Jesus was honest. “I don't condemn you. But now go and don't sin anymore.”

Did you hear it? Honest, but in a loving way. Be honest, but with wisdom. Do it in love. Okay. Love is Living, Love is Open.

Love is Valuing.

Jesus valued this woman as a child of God, as someone God loves.

Love acknowledges that God loves all people.

One of the greatest reasons people do harmful things to themselves and others is because they don't know that they have worth, they have value in this world. Their lives mean

something. They are loved. If you don't know that or have never experienced that, then it is hard to live out of that. That is why we must be the ones to show it.

Jesus saw beyond this woman's immediate situation and saw the potential she had for her life.

Love sees that God has a purpose for every life.

Now I know that can be difficult. Why? Because I don't necessarily like everyone I meet. I know, that sounds blasphemous coming from a pastor, but it's reality if you are a human being. You're not necessarily going to connect with every person you meet.

"I may not like what a person does, but I like the person." Well.....

Like? Not necessarily. Love? Absolutely.

You think Jesus really liked the guy who was whipping Him? Or how about the guy who hammered huge spike-sized nails through His arms?

Did He love them? Enough to ask God to forgive them while He was hanging from the cross.

You see, because:

Love includes Everyone.

Jesus put the woman caught in adultery, and all people, including His killers, into God's hands.

Love places people into God's hands. Pray for everyone—friends and foe alike.

We're not going to like everyone. There are those who will hurt you. But love is the only thing that will change this world, one life at a time. Love is the only way to step out of the cycle of hatred, prejudice, fear, and self-absorption that so cripples us as God's creations.

Jesus had a crowd around Him. He understood that they were all different and at different places in their own understanding of God.

Love accepts that people are different from me.

Because as I love, as I live and am open and value everyone, that opens the door for that person to come to God. God can work in our midst, using me as a vessel of His love. Yes, and then something else amazing happens—I am changed too.

"Onward we Go" Jesus said if we have faith like a mustard seed, amazing things will happen. There is a real-life-changing hope that exists. Now together, in our diversity, we go on. Amen.