## John 15:9-17

As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love. If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father’s commandments and abide in his love. I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete. “This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. No one has greater love than this, to lay down one’s life for one’s friends. You are my friends if you do what I command you. I do not call you servants any longer, because the servant does not know what the master is doing; but I have called you friends, because I have made known to you everything that I have heard from my Father. You did not choose me but I chose you. And I appointed you to go and bear fruit, fruit that will last, so that the Father will give you whatever you ask him in my name. I am giving you these commands so that you may love one another.

A few days ago, I was browsing the internet, searching for inspiration for today's sermon. I typed “*love one another*” and one of the first things that popped up was this: “Looking for the perfect love one another? You can stop your search and come to Etsy, the marketplace where sellers around the world express their creativity through handmade and vintage goods! With Etsy, buyers like you can find hundreds or thousands of unique, affordable love one another! Let's get started!”

Well, I was hooked, so I clicked and saw page after page of beautiful *love one another*: framed prints, wooden plaques, t-shirts, vinyl stickers – even worry stones. Most of what I saw was creative and attractive, but what do you have when you hand over your credit card information and open the package when it comes? A beautiful piece of art or a nice item of clothing; lovely, inspirational even, but *perfect*? I have nothing against Etsy; I once even had an Etsy store, but *perfect love one another*? I feel pretty confident saying this: Perfect love is not found on Etsy, nor in any store, online or not. Perfect love finds us. We pay nothing for it but it comes at the ultimate price. We can speak about it, hang a saying about it on the wall or sing about it, but perfect love only comes alive when it is shared with another. Perfect love comes out of the perfect obedience of a Son for his Father. It is lived out of the imperfect obedience of those the Son has chosen – obedience to him and to all those whom he cherishes. And, lest this all sound unbearably oppressive, perfect love comes with pure, life-giving joy: joy from the Father who gives it to the Son who lives to grace his followers with it.

The gospel writer John has only one commandment in his whole book. In it, John sums up all the commandments given to the Israelites; the commandment is this: “that you love one another as I have loved you.” Here, John explains how God's love expands to include not only the Israelites but also the Gentiles and all those who do not yet believe in God. It starts with a Father who loves his Son. The Son so loves the ones given to him by the Father that he gives his life for his friends; this is how they will know how to offer their lives for one another. The power behind this command comes from God. “You did not choose me,” Jesus says, “but I chose you.”

It is incredibly humbling and thrilling to know that you and I were chosen – chosen even before we were born. Jesus chooses to love us. He loves us enough to die for us and then places his resurrection life in our hearts so they beat in his love's rhythm. That love is steady and never-ending. This is perfect love: selfless, sacrificial, enduring and holy. We can do nothing to earn it. We cannot purchase it, not with any worldly currency, not with any good works or intentions. But others cannot have it until we share it. This is why we are chosen: to receive Jesus' incredible love and then to pass it on to those who need it. “Abide in me as I abide in you,” Jesus tells us. “Love one another.”

Of course, it's a whole lot harder than John's words make it sound. It's possible to be filled with Jesus' love and then to fumble and stumble while trying to carry out Jesus' command. I know that as well, if not better, than anyone. Reaching a certain age, getting ready to retire, looking back at a lifetime of trying to follow Jesus has made me acutely aware of my failures as a Christian and as a pastor. So often, my limitations, my selfishness, my awkwardness have led me to love quite imperfectly. I err in what I do, saying the wrong things at the wrong times. I err in what I do not do. I do not see the needs of others when they are right in front of me, so consumed am I by my own concerns. I am fairly certain that all of you feel the same way, at least those who have lived a while in this world. When we look at over 200 years of ministry as a parish, we can say the same thing: that we get it wrong as often as we get it right, that our discipleship alternates between being a shining light and a flickering flame that threatens to burn out at any time.

But here's the thing. You and I are not expected to be perfect. We are chosen to be faithful. *Perfect love one another* starts in the heart of God*.* God's love is steady and unwavering. God chooses us to receive the love poured out in the gift of God's Son. The Son loves us to the end: to the end of his life and to the other side. The Son's love forgives our mistakes, gets us back on course when we veer off onto roads that better suit our selfish desires. The Son's love opens our eyes to what is around us and calls us to respond in love. And we do. We feed those who need food. We pray for those who are sick or grieving, those who are lonely and forgotten, those who struggle to make it in a world that can be brutally unforgiving. We reach out to those who have lost their way, those who have never known that they are chosen by Jesus to receive and bear his love. We teach our children and grandchildren to be kind and compassionate. We strive to be less selfish, more selfless. We hear Jesus' words of love in all their myriad expressions: in scripture and song, in the embrace of those who love us, in the incredible beauty of mountains and budding trees, blooming flowers and gorgeous sunsets. We confess our shortcomings and we are forgiven. We receive bread for the journey and strength from one another.

And while we know we will not reach true perfection in love in this life, we draw encouragement from words like these from 1 John: “There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear; for fear has to do with punishment, and whoever fears has not reached perfection in love.” Jesus' perfect love casts out fear or at least some of it. Jesus' perfect love showers us with joy and even when we do not completely feel it, that joy is a never-ending gift that can catch us by surprise if we let it. Jesus' perfect love chooses us to be his friends, his servants, sharers of his love. And so we go on, Jesus' perfect love borne in imperfect vessels. Though we might not always know what lies ahead, though that makes us fearful at times, we know that his hand is leading us, his Spirit is calming our fears and his love is providing for us. And that is enough.

With apologies to Etsy, “In Jesus, sinners like us can find infinite unique *perfect love another*! Let's get started!” Amen.

*Easter 6B*

*May 6, 2018*

*Floyd-Willis Lutheran Parish*

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