

## Children

Good morning, boys and girls. Isn't this a lovely baby I have with me today? (Let them answer.) She's a real sweetheart, and you can bet her mom and dad love her an awful lot. Why do you suppose her mom and dad love her so much? (Let them answer.) Those are good reasons. Because she's cute, because she's a girl; because she smiles a lot. Most of all, they love her just because she belongs to them.

How many things do you think this baby can do? (Let them guess.) She can gurgle and coo. She can cry when she's hungry. She can roll over. She can play with her toys and smile at people. But -- she can't do very much else, can she, boys and girls? (Let them respond.) Babies aren't really good for much, are they? They can't talk and tell you what they want. They can't help with the dishes or pick up their toys. They can't dress themselves. If babies are so helpless and useless, why do we love them so much? (Let them answer.) Yes, boys and girls -- we love them "just because." You mother and father loved you like that right from the time you were born. Even when you cried all night and kept them awake, they loved you. Even when you got sick and they had to miss a vacation or a special trip, they loved you. Even when you threw your food on the floor or broke your mother's favorite dish, your parents still loved you.

Moms and dads love us just the way God loves us. Even though we don't do very many good things, God loves us. God loved us before we were born; he will love us until we die and join him in heaven. Just as this baby didn't have to do anything to make her parents love her, so we didn't have to do anything either to get God's love. When this baby grows up, do you think it will love its mom and dad? (Let them answer.) Yes. And as you and I grow up as Christians, we begin to love God back; we begin to live as he would like us to live. But the most wonderful thing about God -- and about parents -- is that they loved us first, when we were helpless, like this baby. They teach us how to love and so we can love back. We can love God because now we know that God loves us.

I

Phil was sitting quietly in his office going over some last minute notes on his Sunday sermon when his wife, Connie, appeared in the doorway and stated, "We have to talk!" Phil, knowing his wife was usually a very calm person, sensed that something disturbing had happened, and so asked his wife to come in and close the door. Connie, looking deeply concerned, came into the office, closed the door and sat down. "We have a problem," she sighed, and then handed a crumpled up piece of note paper across the desk to her husband.

"What's this?" he asked, accepting the paper.

"Just read it," she replied. Phil unfolded the note and read in big letters, "1-900-FOR-BABE."  
"That," said Connie, "was in Eli's pocket."

Phil read the note again and tried to reason it out. Why would their youngest son Eli have this telephone number in his pocket? "1-900-FOR-BABE." Someone at school could have given Eli the number as a joke. Maybe even his older brother, Josh. Certainly Eli was too young to be

interested in such things. But, try as he might, Phil could not shake the idea that his 9-year-old son might really have copied the number down for himself and, horror of horrors, might have already used it. He and Connie would have to get to the bottom of this right away.

That evening after supper, Phil and Connie called young Eli into the family room and produced the note. "What is this all about?" Connie asked Eli, after he had time to examine the incriminating evidence.

"It's for Dad," he replied calmly.

"For Dad?" Phil and Connie blurted out together.

"What do you mean, it's for Dad?" Connie asked, giving Phil a sideways glance.

"Well," replied Eli, "you know how much Dad likes to fish?"

"Yes," Connie said slowly, wondering where this was going.

"Well, I was watching this fishing program on TV last Saturday," said Eli. "You know, the one we always watch. At the end of the show, there was this advertisement about getting some information for all the fishing hot spots. Then Babe Winkleman came on and said if you wanted to get the list, all you had to do was call 1-900-FOR-BABE. So I wrote it down for Dad." (1)

Have you ever noticed that things are not always what they seem? I chuckled when I read about a pastor who was taking a morning walk. He came across a woman pushing a baby carriage up a hill. She was struggling with it a little bit, so he offered to push it up for her. It was a mighty unwieldy baby carriage, so it was no easy job to get it to the top. Once they had reached her house, the woman thanked the pastor for his help. The pastor replied, "Do you mind if I take a little peek at the precious baby that I've been pushing all this time?" The woman laughed, "Mercy me, Pastor! This ain't a baby we been struggling with. It's my husband's weekly six-pack of beer." No, things are not always what they seem.

I wonder how many people could look at our lives your life and my life and know that there are two laws to which Christians are to conform: to love God and to love our neighbor as ourselves. That's it. That's what it means to be a follower of Jesus Christ. Love God love your neighbor.

A lawyer came to Jesus and asked him, "Teacher, which is the greatest commandment in the Law?" And Jesus said to him, " You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.' This is the great and foremost commandment. The second is like it, You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' On these two commandments depend the whole Law and the Prophets." I wonder is that what our neighbors see when they look at us? Love for God love for neighbor?

But what is love? We talked about "love your neighbor" for 150 years in this country without applying it to our African-American friends. Many African-Americans say we still don't. What is love? So often we say "I love you" when what we really mean is "I need you," and when I no longer need you, I will be through with you. What is love? We hear people say, "I love my new car." Is that love? If you were to list the qualities that make up love, where would you begin? Let me share my list with you and see if your list would match up with mine.

FIRST OF ALL, LOVE IS SOMETHING YOU LEARN.

We are not born loving. Babies are lovable, to be sure. But they are not necessarily loving. We come into this world grasping. Our chief concern is our own needs. We cry and someone meets our needs, and we are contented. Unfortunately, some people never get beyond that kind of approach to life. But most of us learn somewhere a long the way to share. We learn to quit grasping and to start giving. We learn to return love as well as to receive it. We learn to love because someone important in our life models love for us.

Sandra Palmer Carr in *The Upper Room* tells about rocking her younger son Boyd, then four years old, in a high-backed wooden rocking chair. Boyd was facing his Mom as they rocked, his legs folded at the knee.

Suddenly, he lifted his small head, stared straight at his mother, and became very still. Then he cupped her face in his tender little hands and said almost in a whisper, "Mommy, I'm in your eyes." He had seen his own reflection in his mother's eyes, and this strangely affected him. Mother and son stayed in that same position for several long moments as the rocking stopped and the room grew quiet. "And I'm in yours," his mother said. Then he leaned his head against her contentedly, and she resumed rocking and singing. Occasionally, in the days that followed, Boyd would check to see if his discovery was lasting. "Am I still in your eyes, Mommy?" he would ask as he reached up for her.

Boyd learned to love from his Mom. Each of us learned to love the same way. From Mom. From Dad, from Grandparents, a favorite aunt. Each of us has our own story to tell. We saw ourselves in someone else's eyes.

But where did such love originate? The epistle of John tells us it originated with God who is the source of love. We love because God first loved us.

"In life's uncertain moments," writes Sandra Carr, "it is comforting to know I am still in my heavenly Father's eyes." Love is something you learn.

## SECONDLY, LOVE IS SOMETHING YOU DO.

Love is proactive. We can talk about love until we are blue in the face. If our actions aren't loving, though, our love is meaningless.

Dennis and Barbara Rainey have written a book titled, Moments Together for Couples. In it, they tell about a group known as "The Men of the Titanic." Mark, a pastor in Toledo, Ohio, put together this group of men who resolved to demonstrate that they love their wives sacrificially. They named themselves after the men who sacrificed their lives so their wives and children could board the lifeboats as that famous ocean liner sank back in 1912.

For six months, these men planned the most incredible evening a woman could imagine. They made handwritten invitations and sent limousines to pick up their wives. The women were escorted into a banquet hall decorated in nautical themes. A corsage was at each wife's place setting. The men took training on how to serve their wives the meal, which was an exact replica of the six-course meal that was served in the first-class dining room on the Titanic the night it sank. A ship's bell signaled the end of each course. Then the men cleared the tables and sang love songs between each course. After the meal, one of the men stood up and announced that a letter had been found floating in the debris of the Titanic. It was now being read for the first time. Then he read a wonderful love letter of praise and affection from a man to his wife. At the end of the letter, he revealed that he had actually written the letter for his own wife. Then each man presented his wife with her own love letter. Later, the pastor said, "There was something

sacred about the entire evening. It was a celebration that our wives were gifts from God to us."  
(3)

I realize I am now in trouble with every husband in the house. Most husbands never go to that kind of trouble to demonstrate their love for their wives. According to surveys, most wives wish their husbands would simply say "I love you" more often. But SAYING we love is not enough either. Love is a concrete act. "God so loved that He GAVE His Son . . . ." Love is something you learn. Love is also something you do.

FINALLY, LOVE IS THE WORLD'S ONLY HOPE.

If we don't help the world discover love real love then our world will never break the cycle of despair and violence that engulfs it from century to century in barbarous wars.

I don't see any other hope for the world than that men and women and young people and children shall learn to love, do you? That is why it is important for the world to know about Jesus Christ for he is love personified. He showed us real love in action. He taught us that love is at the heart of authentic religion. People need to know that God is "Abba," Daddy. People need to know it's not how pious you act but how much you love that is at the heart of faith. People need to know that love is a concrete act showing concern, compassion, and forgiveness. That kind of love can save the world. It cuts across racial lines, nationality lines, gender lines. It binds us together into a community of oneness in Christ.

Most of you know the name Corrie ten Boom whose story, *The Hiding Place*, has inspired millions. Not many people know of her equally courageous nephew, Peter van Woerden.

During the days of Nazi occupation in Holland, Peter transported Jewish children under the cover of darkness from their home in Harlem to other secret hiding places where they were saved from the Nazis. He was eventually caught and spent several months in prison. After the war, he and his musical family traveled throughout Israel, singing and witnessing for the Lord. When he had a massive heart attack, they rushed him to Haddasah Hospital in Jerusalem. The doctor on call that day skillfully saved his life.

After he recuperated, Peter expressed his gratitude to the medical staff. When they discussed the Holocaust, the doctor suddenly burst into tears. So did Peter. For as they compared notes, the doctor told Peter that he was one of those children Peter had rescued. Now, years later, their paths had providentially crossed, and one of those whom Peter had saved from extinction was there to save him. (4)

Peter van Woerden and Corrie ten Boom have modeled for us the kind of love that will one day save the world. It is a love without boundaries or borders that makes no distinction with regard to race or religion. We need to begin that pilgrimage of love today.

One of the national tragedies of recent days has been the burning of African-American churches across our nation. The people who have perpetrated these acts love neither their neighbors nor God. Imagine facing God some day and saying, "I burned one of your places of worship." While these are probably isolated acts of desperately unhappy and tormented individuals, such overt acts of racial hatred are encouraged by the climate of suspicion and distrust that still pervades many of our people in this land. You and I need to search out our hearts and see if there is more that we might do to introduce people to the love of Jesus Christ for truly, to know Jesus is to know love. Sometimes things are not what they seem. Let me return to my original question: If

people were to look at our lives, would they understand that the two great commandments of our faith are to love God and to love our neighbor?

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1. David Wendel, United Methodist Church, Esterville, IA.
  2. May/June 1996, p. 15.
  3. (Ventura, California: Regal Books, 1995).
  4. ISRAEL FOR CHRIST newsletter. Cited by Don Maddox, First Presbyterian Church, Bakersfield, California in PARABLES, etc., June 1996, p. 3.  
Dynamic Preaching, Collected Sermons, by King Duncan

## II

If you look at a map of Alaska you will see a thin, wavy line about midway between Nome and Teller, Alaska. This line is known as Mary's River. It was named for an Eskimo woman many years ago who lived along the shores of the river with her husband and their two children. But then tragedy struck--the village was hit by a deadly flu. This happened during the gold rush era when men were frantically searching for gold in the Alaskan wilderness. The flu took the life of the woman's children and her husband. Fourteen other children in the village lost their parents to the flu. Out of compassion, this woman adopted all 14 of these children. She also extended her hands of kindness to gold prospectors, offering them accommodation and feeding. The miners who had a difficult time pronouncing her Eskimo name, opted to call her simply, Mary, as suggested by one of the miners who said, "It's a grand old name." To honor her kindness to them, the miners named the stream that passed by her home "Mary's River"--and it remains Mary's River to this day.

But there is more. When teachers from the United States founded schools in the little river village they, too, heard the story. So they named the settlement "Mary's Igloo." Maps today show this settlement too. As the village grew, other things were named for her. Now there are Mary's trees and Mary's reindeer. Mary married a second time and, of course, he was known by one name only--"Mary's husband." If you ever get to Mary's River, Alaska, I hope you will remember--it is a monument to the power of this woman's love for her family and neighbors. We all know how important love is to our lives. In today's lesson from Matthew's Gospel we read these words: Hearing that Jesus had silenced the Sadducees, the Pharisees got together. One of them, an expert in the law, tested him with this question: "Teacher, which is the greatest commandment in the Law?"

Jesus replied "You shall love the Lord, your God, with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the greatest and the first commandment. The second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself. The whole law and the prophets depend on these two commandments."

We've heard those words so many times, but they are still breath-taking. Everything that it means to be a Christian can be boiled down to these two simple commandments.

Love is at the center of our faith. How can we minimize the importance of these verses? Here is what Christian faith is all about: Love for God and love for one's neighbor.

Note that both of these commandments are in the Old Testament. After all Jesus said he had not come to abolish the law but to fulfill it. Israel needed to be reminded of what was central, what was fundamental, what was truly essential in their faith--just as Christians need to be reminded today.

Some of you are familiar with the name Amy Carmichael. Though barely known in Europe and the Americas, like Mother Teresa, Amy Carmichael made a name for herself in India, where she touched the lives of thousands of women.

Carmichael was born and raised at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century in a home in Ireland. When she turned 16, she made a bold move by packing her things and moving to Belfast. Her goal: to establish a mission for women who worked in mills. It didn't take her long to meet with success, as the membership of her mission grew to more than 500 women.

But Carmichael knew that wasn't really what she wanted to do with her life. Her ultimate goal was to be an overseas missionary. And she got her opportunity. After a brief stint in Japan, she was posted to India.

Carmichael had a strong spirit. The hot and unfriendly climate of India did not deter her from fulfilling her dream. Neither did the dangers missionaries often encounter. However, she suffered dreadfully from neuralgia which oftentimes left her no choice but to run her mission from her bed. When her condition grew worse, she was moved back to her home in Ireland. After a period of rest she again returned to India stronger and better, and this time channeled her efforts to rescuing young Indian women who were working as prostitutes in Hindu Temples, a work at which she was highly effective.

Instead of returning home after completing her assignment, Carmichael chose to spend the rest of her life in India. She went as far as dyeing her skin with coffee to make it match that of the Indian people, and this allowed her to travel safely around the country.

Carmichael spent the last 75 years of her life in India without for one day setting her feet back in Ireland. Sadly, she suffered paralysis for the last 20 years of her life, thanks to a bad fall she experienced. The neuralgia she suffered did not make things easy in any way. Yet Carmichael's efforts eventually led the government to ban temple prostitution across India in 1948.

After her death, Amy Carmichael was buried in India. The children she saved erected a birdbath over her grave with the word *Amma* inscribed on it, meaning "mother" in the Tamil language. (1) Love is at the center of our faith. Amy Carmichael personified that love. Who can help but think of St. Paul's great words, "If I speak in the tongues of men or of angels, but do not have love, I am only a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal" (I Corinthians 13:1). I am firmly convinced that the skeptical eye with which the world regards the Christian community today could quickly be transformed into admiration and respect if we simply lived out these central two teachings of the Master. Islam in its founding noticed that Christians do not practice what they preach. Love is essential to our faith as followers of Jesus Christ.

Love is also essential to our physical and emotional well-being.

You've probably heard of that sad study that was made years ago of ninety-seven babies, ages three months to three years, in a South American children's home. These babies were well fed, clothed, and had good medical attention. But there was no one to love them or play with them. After several months these babies began to lose their appetites. Their health failed. Within two years, thirty-four were dead and twenty-one were beginning to have numerous physical and emotional problems. These lives were destroyed for only one reason. They were emotionally starved. They had everything but love.

Love is essential to our physical and emotional well-being.

The Alameda County Study. "Headed by a Harvard social scientist, it tracked the lives of 7,000 people over nine years. Researchers found that the most isolated people were three times more likely to die than those with strong relational connections.

"People who had bad health habits (such as smoking, poor eating habits, obesity, or alcohol use) but strong social ties lived significantly longer than people who had great health habits but were isolated. In other words," "it is better to eat Twinkies with good friends than to eat broccoli alone."

"Harvard researcher Robert Putnam notes that if you belong to no groups but decide to join one, 'you cut your risk of dying over the next year in half.'" (2) Join the military where they issue you

a battle buddy, should be our next recruiting campaign – live longer join the Army, with some exceptions.

That's how powerful love is. Love is essential to our physical and emotional well-being. A study that examined the effects of World War II bombings upon children in London, England. "Children who stayed in the city during the bombings, going into underground shelters with their parents, actually fared better, psychologically and socially, than did those children who were taken out of London to a safe place in the country, away from the bombs, but also away from their families. Even though the children who remained in London faced the very real possibility that their houses might be destroyed and that they might be physically harmed, they nevertheless found a higher level of peace, not in external security, but through significant relationships." (3)

The prominent psychiatrist Karl Menninger was featured in an article carried by the *Chicago Daily News* titled, "Love working miracles for the mentally ill in Kansas." Dr. Menninger contended that love is one of the most effective cures in healing mental illness. When reporters asked Menninger how it was that 80% of his patients recovered, he replied, the secret is not in electroshock, surgery, group-therapy, drugs, etc. These play a part, but the real secret is contained in a single word: LOVE! (4)

Love is at the center of our faith. Love is essential to our physical and emotional well-being. And that brings us to the last thing to be said: Love is our primary calling as followers of Jesus. How will the world know we are Christians? By our love. John 13:35: "By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another." Love is our primary calling. Love for God and love for our neighbors.

The Olympic games of 1988 in Seoul, South Korea. These Olympics captured the attention of people around the world. The games were filled with glitz--records were broken, winners became household names.

You may remember the name Ben Johnson of Canada. Johnson broke a record in the 100-meter race. His fame soared high afterwards--until he failed a doping test which showed he took performance-enhancing drugs. The gold medal which was stripped from him was given to Carl Lewis, an American runner who had taken second place.

For Canadians the event would have been a completely disappointing outing, but for a fellow competitor named Lawrence Lemieux of Edmonton, Alberta, Canada. Lemieux saved his countrymen from total embarrassment.

Lemieux, an experienced yacht sailor was well on his way to clinching silver in the yacht competition. Competing in the Olympics had been his life-long dream. But then something occurred that no one ever expected.

Joseph Chan of Singapore was racing close to Lemieux when he lost control of his yacht. When Lemieux noticed him, Chan's yacht had already capsized. Chan was struggling in the water. He was injured, barely staying afloat. Without a second thought, Lemieux abandoned the race and reached out for his fellow sportsman and brought him aboard his own boat.

Unfortunately, his act of bravery and sportsmanship cost Lemieux the silver medal which had been well within his reach. But Lemieux's act of bravery wasn't about to be forgotten. At the closing ceremony of the 1988 Olympics, organizers of the games rewarded Lemieux efforts by awarding him the Pierre de Coubertin Medal, a medal awarded to athletes who display an exceptional spirit of sportsmanship.

In an interview after the Olympics, Lemieux said "As a sailor, your duty first is to people in distress . . . medals can follow afterwards." According to him, he only wanted to do what was right and not to be a hero. Saving a distressed soul according to him is worth more than going after medals. (5)

That is certainly true. You and I will probably never compete on the world stage, but each of us can reach out and make a difference in the life of someone who is struggling.

A woman called Mary did that in Alaska and, to this day, her name is all over maps of that state. An Olympic athlete did that and earned his country's praise for his sportsmanship. Who is there that you and I can show Christian love to? Who do we know who is struggling to whom we can reach out?

An expert in the law tested Jesus with this question: "Teacher, which is the greatest commandment in the Law?"

Jesus replied: "'Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.' This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.' All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments."

That says it all. Love is at the center of our faith. Love is essential to our physical and emotional well-being. Love is our primary calling as followers of Jesus.

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1. Adapted from Michal Stawicki and Jeannie Ingraham, *99 Perseverance Success Stories: Encouragement for Success in Every Walk of Life* (Kindle Edition).
  2. *Everybody's Normal Till You Get to Know Them* (Harper Collins).
  3. Joel D. Kline, [http://www.hacob.org/sermons/2003/09-07-03\\_jdk.html](http://www.hacob.org/sermons/2003/09-07-03_jdk.html).
  4. Contributed. Source: Joel Santos, <http://www.sermoncentral.com/sermons/the-power-of-a-true-love-joel-santos-sermon-on-unconditional-love-76081-content/uploads/2014/03/3.2.14-Micah-6.1-8-Learning-Humility-Doing-Justice.pdf>.
  5. Contributed. Adapted from a sermon by Pat Cook, <https://www.sermoncentral.com/sermons/runner-up-pat-cook-sermon-on-people-in-the-gospel-87087>.

III Desiano

What did I spend my week doing? Well, I was reading Pope Francis' new encyclical, *Fratelli Tutti*. The Italian title is the actual English title because "Fratelli" can mean brothers and sisters in Italian and Spanish, and not just "brothers." At over 40,000 words, the encyclical really wants to tell us something.

Pope Francis sees a lot of division, self-interest, and national interest being espoused today and it worries him. Ongoing division and the inability to respect and accept each other are the only fruits we get from these limited perspectives. Unless our minds and hearts are expansive and accepting, our world will remain in danger.

How would I put the Pope's message? Perhaps the simplest way to say it would be: unless our love is broad enough to extend to everyone, it is not the love God asks of us. We hear in the Gospel the phrase from Jewish law that Jesus repeats: love your neighbor as yourself. And we know Jesus, in Luke's Gospel, embarrassed his questioner when he asked "Who is my neighbor?" by telling the parable of the Good Samaritan. But, instinctively, we have a very limited scope of who our neighbors are.

Look at the difference between neighborhood and neighbor. Neighborhood can carry all kinds of associations that might make us proud or ashamed, if we have great restaurants, for example, or if there is lots of crime. But neighbors are not an area or a thing. Neighbors are people—in all their peculiarities and limitations, in all their charm and nastiness. People can love their neighborhoods, but can they love their neighbors?

Dorothy Day was a great Catholic convert who achieved a prophetic voice during her lifetime. She began the Catholic Worker movement, an attempt to serve those people most deprived in society. She had an open-house philosophy: if people entered one of her Catholic Worker



houses in need, she took them in, fed them, and gave them lodging. Some people thought she was crazy. But she said this: the love you have for God is only as big as the love you have for the person you like the least.

After all, if, as Pope Francis says, everyone human being has dignity because they were created by, and are loved by God, then how can I claim to love God if I do not love what God loves? We hear sections from the book of Exodus called the “holiness code”—where Moses says we must have the same compassion that God has. The alien, the poor, the defenseless, the widow, the orphan, the laborer, the one who owes you: you have to stretch yourself until your love covers everyone. Our list would include the immigrant, those on welfare, the unemployed, the homeless, the addicted.

Perhaps at no point in history is this a more difficult message than today; we will have to see how the Pope’s message is received because look how long we’ve had God’s message and we’ve not heard it or acted upon it. As long as I think I’m inherently more important than anyone else, I do not know how to value people. In fact, I do not know how to value myself as God values me.

No one is excluded from God’s love. This is a fundamental understanding of our faith. Our tasks as disciples of Jesus is to live in such a way that this becomes clear to everyone: by my words, my attitudes, my deeds, and, at times, my heroic gestures. When God’s command to love becomes our way of life, then maybe the hope God has for the world will become clearer to everyone.