

I LOVE MY CHURCH

Several years ago there was an Olympics held in Seattle Washington. And the special event that was talked about for years afterward was the 100 yard dash. Lined up on the starting line were 9 contestants, waiting for the gun to go off. At the gun, they started their run... kind of. For this was the Special Olympics a competition for physically or mentally handicapped people. The nine young men and women were filled with excitement as they ran and laughed and raced to the finish line. But one little boy stumbled on the asphalt. He tumbled over a couple of times and fell on his face and lay there crying. The other eight heard him and slowed down and looked back. Then they all turned around and went back - every one of them. One girl with Down's syndrome bent down and kissed him and said, "This will make it better." Then all nine linked arms and walked together to the finish line. And everyone in the stadium stood, and the applause went on for what seemed like forever.

What had that audience seen that day? They had seen love in action. And it had such a powerful effect on them that they stood and applauded. Today we are beginning a new series called "I Love My Church." Over the next 5 weeks we are going to look at what it means to love your church and some ways in which we can do that.

John 13:34 A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. 35 By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another.

Jesus is speaking here to his disciples. In this scripture Jesus is saying three things about love;

1. Love is EXPECTED

Jesus starts here in verse 34 "a new command I give you." Love is not optional for us as believers. It is commanded of us. Jesus EXPECTS it from us. He not only tells us that we should love but He also tells us who and how we should love. He says here that we are to love ONE ANOTHER. In the context of this scripture, Jesus is speaking to his disciples. He is saying that we should love other believers. This does not mean that we should not also love those outside the church, it just means that love should start inside the church. He also says that we should love one another "as I have loved you" Our love for the church should be the same as the love that Jesus has for the church. It should be a complete and sacrificial love.

What does it mean to love your church? Is there a particular thing that you love to do? I 'love' fishing. Have you ever visited a restaurant that you really enjoyed? The food was amazing, the service was excellent and the price was reasonable. If someone were to ask you what your favorite place to eat out was you would say that restaurant. You just really 'love' eating at that place.

Compare that kind of love with the love you have for your spouse or your children. I love my wife and I love my daughters. I now have two girls who have left for college. It was great having them home for the summer and it is hard having them gone. The love that I have for my wife and kids is far greater than the love I have for fishing or for things like a restaurant.

So what are we saying when we say, "I love my church"? What does it mean when Jesus commanded us to love one another? Does He want us to love one another like you loved your activity or experience at the restaurant, or does He want me to love the church like I do my daughter?

With restaurants there is an internet service called Yelp. It is a place you can go where you can rate your experience. If the food was great and the service was good and the price reasonable then you could go ahead and rate it on Yelp. That would be your way of recommending that place to others. If it was a bad experience then you could give a poor rating to tell others to avoid it.

With my family, it isn't about service. It is about relationship. I love my family for who they are, not necessarily what they have done. I am intrinsically connected with my family. My love for them is unconditional and sacrificial. There are good times and there are bad times, but you don't try to rate your family on Yelp. You just love them.

The church was never meant to be like a restaurant; it is a family. Our love for one another is based on relationships. This begins first and foremost in a relationship with Jesus, and through that we are connected to one another. Jesus loves us and has brought us into relationship with Himself. This morning we are going to celebrate that love by having a time of communion together.

In being brought into that relationship, we aren't only brought into a relationship with Jesus but also into relationship with one another. Being in a relationship with Jesus means being part of the church, part of His kingdom, part of the family of faith.

Many people treat the church like a restaurant. If the experience isn't just to their liking, they'll find somewhere else or not go at all. This is beyond unfortunate. This sets up expectations for the church that it was never intended to fulfill. Also, and we have to be honest here, that kind of love is not relationship focused; it is self focused. This is not loving as Jesus loved. Coming to church whenever you see fit, or whenever you are comfortable with it, and only if it is enjoyable and meets your needs is selfish. The church isn't supposed to be like that.

You will experience a love for the church when you intentionally love the church. You will have a deep sense of love for the church when you actively and intentionally practice love for the church. The opposite is also true: When you don't intentionally love the church, then you will not experience a love for the church. We'll love the church when it is about relationships, not when it is like a restaurant.

Love is a choice that we make. Saying that you love your church does not mean that the church is perfect or that there is never any problems. In every family there will be problems. I grew up in a church that was very traditional and very boring. As a young person it really turned me off. I loved Jesus but could not stand going to church. Eventually I decided that I would become a medical missionary and work in a para-church setting. I was going supposed to go to medical school but I ended up breaking my arm a week before school started. I missed the opportunity and decided that I would enroll again the next year. During that time I decided to take some courses at Tyndale Seminary. My first course was about the church, and I fell in love with it again because I was reminded of it's purpose. I began seeing the church the way Jesus sees the church.

2. Love is REFLECTED

Love is not just expected of us by God, it is also expected of us from the world. It says here in verse 35 "by this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another." The word Christian literally means a 'little Christ.' Jesus said people would know us by our love. In other words, if you claim to be a follower of Christ, you will reflect Christ's character. God is love, so we as Christians need to show love as well. When people see us they should see Christ. We should be reflectors of His love.

Alexander the Great, one of the greatest military generals who ever lived, conquered almost the entire Mediterranean world with his vast army. One night during a campaign, he couldn't sleep and left his tent to walk around the campgrounds. As he was walking he came across a soldier asleep on guard duty. That was a serious offense. The penalty for falling asleep on guard duty was, in some cases, instant death; the commanding officer sometimes poured kerosene on the sleeping soldier and lit it. The soldier began to wake up as Alexander the Great approached him. Recognizing who was standing in front of him, the young man feared for his life. "Do you know what the penalty is for falling asleep on guard duty?" Alexander the Great asked the soldier. "Yes, sir," the soldier responded in a quivering voice. "Soldier, what's your name?" demanded Alexander the Great. "Alexander, sir." Alexander the Great repeated the question: "What is your name?" "My name is Alexander, sir," the soldier repeated. A third time and more loudly Alexander the Great asked, "What is your name?" A third time the soldier meekly said, "My name is Alexander, sir." Alexander the Great then looked the young soldier straight in the eye. "Soldier," he said with intensity, "either change your conduct or change your name."

There are many ways in which we demonstrate love, but Jesus here says that the primary way we are to demonstrate love is by how we treat one another. How do you treat other Christians. Our love for one another shows in a practical way our love for God.

1 John 4:19-21 We love because he first loved us. 20 If anyone says, "I love God," yet hates his brother, he is a liar. For anyone who does not love his brother, whom he has seen, cannot love God, whom he has not seen. 21 And he has given us this command: Whoever loves God must also love his brother.

It was the closing night of a summer VBS. The teacher of one of the classes had missed one night and hadn't encountered a boy who had come that night, but who was there that Friday. He only had one hand. It shook her a little... and she began to be afraid that the others might make fun of him. In fact, she was so distracted by this that when time came for the closing program she mechanically led the children onto the stage and told them "Now, let's all build our churches. Put your hands together now, here is the church, here is the steeple" Then suddenly, she was aware that she had done. The little boy couldn't build a "church" because he had only one hand.

After a moment of awkward silence, the little girl seated next to the boy with one hand held her hand up to his and said, "Here, let's build the church together." That little girl understood the truth of Christian love. Christian love is when one believer reaches out to another believer to build Christ's church. God calls us to be devoted to one another... to honor one another above ourselves.

3. Love is DIRECTED

Love is not only expected and reflected, it must also be directed. Love is expensive. It costs us. The love that Jesus talks about is a sacrificial love which means that it is more than just a feeling. Love is more than just a quiver in your liver. It involves action.

Thomas a' Kempis said it this way: "Whoever loves much, does much."

What does it look like to intentionally love the church? To be in community with one another as God intended it to be? Well, that's what the rest of this series is about! Let me give you an overview of what we'll be looking at:

We love one another by connecting. Part of love is making the decision to belong. Being in community must be intentional. It is choosing to get involved and form friendships. Community is more than just saying hi to the person who sits beside you on Sunday or knowing someone's name. We love one another when we stand alongside one another. Being connected with one another is ensuring no one stands alone.

We love one another by serving. Love involves serving. It is understanding God has given each of His followers supernaturally empowered abilities to encourage and help one another and the community. Did you know you have superpowers? We're going to talk about that.

We love one another by giving. It is learning to share not only our time and talents but also our treasure with others.

Lastly, we love one another by sharing our faith beyond the walls of the church. The love that Jesus gives to us and that we can have for one another isn't to be kept to ourselves. The love that we are to have for one another is also meant to show our community what the love of Jesus looks like. If we aren't sharing the love of God with our words and deeds, then we aren't truly loving.

I invite you to stick with us for the next four weeks as we look at various ways that we can intentionally love the church as we see what it is God intended for the community of faith.

If you are with us today and don't have a relationship with Jesus, I invite you to stick around as well. Like me, there may be some of you here today that have had some negative experiences with church in the past, and for that I am truly sorry.

One individual said that Church is often like a bunch of porcupines getting together to get warm. They might get warm... but they can also get hurt.

I want you to know that's not what God intended. But what did He intend? Why not join us for a few weeks to learn about this, what the church is supposed to be like.

I encourage you to get connected in an I Love My Church group. We are forming groups that meet midweek to discuss in more depth the topics we will be covering on Sunday. I want to encourage and challenge you to get into one of these groups. Incredible growth, connections, and answers to questions can be found when a group of people come together in such a way. To get involved please go to the eBooth in the lobby after the service. You can also go to our website and click on the I Love My Church banner on the front page and you will see a link to check out the I Love My Church Small Groups that are available.

As we close today, we cannot really talk about loving one another until we truly understand the love that Jesus has for us. As we come to the communion table this morning we are reminded of that love.

I want to close with a story Fred Craddock told about his father. When he was growing up his father had been hurt by someone in the church. Because of this he stopped going to church. For years the church reached out to him, but he always rejected their offers to go to church with one statement: "All they want is another name and another pledge" (meaning: they didn't care about him, all they wanted was more people and more money).

Year after year, an evangelist would visit the man during the Revival meetings trying to get him to come and he would repeat the same phrase as he dismissed them: "all they want is another name and another pledge." That's what Craddock's father always said... all except one time.

Fred Craddock tells of how his father got cancer. Over a period of time, the once strong man wasted away to a mere 78 pounds, and when Craddock made it home and visited him in his hospital room he was shocked by his father's frail appearance. He was also shocked by the appearance of the room. It was filled with flowers and cards. As Craddock went about the room looking at the flowers and reading their cards he was struck by the fact that for the most part they came from the very members of the church that his father had for so long rejected.

His father motioned him to the bed, and because he could not speak due to the cancer, he weakly wrote these words on his notepad. Words from Hamlet: "Draw your breath in pain as you tell my story..."

"What's your story, dad?" Craddock asked. Then his father wrote these three words "I Was Wrong."

That church loved Craddock's father. And because they loved him they gave God the room and the time to change the man's heart. All because they were committed to concept of loving one another.

For God so loved the world He gave His only son to die on the cross for us. As we come to the communion table this morning we are again reminded of that love.