

“Love Is a Verb”
John 14:15–21
Rev. Henry Pascual

Prayer: *Come, Holy Spirit, our Advocate and Guide. Give us a living word that will empower us to love Jesus, both in word and in deed. Amen.*

We often think of love as a feeling we simply fall into. Something spontaneous. Romantic. Uncontrollable. We speak of love as though it just happens to us, like a sudden change in the weather.

But what if love is **not a noun**? What if it's **a verb**?

In her book *All About Love*, author and educator bell hooks writes, “*The word love is most often defined as a noun, yet... we would all love better if we used it as a verb.*”¹

Her point is this: our culture often treats love as a feeling without responsibility. People say “I love you” while acting in ways that are controlling, neglectful, abusive, or simply indifferent. We use the word so casually that we strip it of its moral weight and ethical responsibility.

She draws here from psychiatrist M. Scott Peck. In his classic book *The Road Less Traveled*, Peck defines love as “*the will to extend one’s self for the purpose of nurturing one’s own or another’s spiritual growth.*”² Peck argues that real love requires discipline. Intention. Effort. Sometimes discomfort. It’s an act of will—an intention that leads to action.³

Put simply: love is something we do.

And Jesus was saying that long before Hooks and Peck ever put it into words. On the night before he died, in that Upper Room, he looked at his friends and said:

“If you love me, you will keep my commandments.”

At first, those words can sound harsh to our modern ears—as if God’s love must be earned. But those of you who have been in relationships for

¹ bell hooks, *All About Love: New Visions* (HarperCollins, 1999), 3.

² M. Scott Peck, *The Road Less Travelled* (Simon & Shuster, 2003), 81.

³ Ibid.

decades—who have raised children, or cared for aging parents, or stayed married through the "lean years"—you know better.

You know that authentic love is never passive. It doesn't sit on the couch. Love acts. Love takes a concrete shape. And that's what Jesus is saying here. He's describing what love naturally does.

Just as a healthy tree bears fruit because that is its nature, a heart shaped by Christ reflects his character. In John's Gospel, the command is clear: Love one another as I have loved you. That is the whole of it. You are loved by God; therefore, you go out and love others.

And yet, the disciples struggle to grasp this. To understand their confusion, we have to look at the atmosphere in that room. Our text comes from what scholars call the *Farewell Discourse* (John 13-17). This is Jesus' *long goodbye*, if you will.

Imagine Jesus and the disciples in the Upper Room. The air is thick with the anxiety of impending loss. The disciples have spent three years with Jesus—walking beside him, listening to him, asking him questions, and depending on his physical presence.

But now Jesus keeps talking about leaving. He speaks of betrayal. Death. Departure. And beneath their confusion is a painful question.

The German theologian Rudolf Bultmann framed the question this way: *Can the disciples still love Jesus when he is gone? Can future generations love Jesus without ever having met him?*⁴

His answer is a resounding *Yes*. But we don't do it through nostalgia or looking backward. We love him by doing what he did—by embodying his love and carrying out his work. By keeping his commandments.

But honestly, it's easier said than done. So, Jesus makes a promise. He assures them of his abiding presence. Jesus says, *"I will not leave you orphaned."*

In the ancient world, being an orphan meant more than just losing parents; it meant being vulnerable, without protection or a secure future. Jesus

⁴ Rudolf Bultmann, *The Gospel of John: A Commentary*, 613.

promises that won't be their story. He promises the *Paraclete*—the "one called alongside."

But Jesus promises that won't be their story. They won't be abandoned. They won't be alone.

It won't be because Jesus promises the *Paraclete*. The word literally means "one called alongside." And it's difficult to translate. Depending on what translation you use, your Bibles might say *Advocate*, *Comforter*, *Counselor*, or *Helper*. But the core idea is the same: the Spirit stands with us when things get difficult.

Jesus also calls this *Advocate* the *Spirit of Truth*. That title matters because we live in a world of noise, confusion, and deception. We need help discerning what is actually true. An educated community like ours understands the value of a master interpreter—someone who reveals the nuance and the depth beneath the surface. The Spirit is that interpreter, empowering us to live out the essence of Jesus' teachings today.

This creates a kind of holy circle. When we live out Christ's words, we become more aware of God's love for us. And as we receive that love, we become more capable of sharing it with others. Grace moves in and through our lives.

And that matters, because Christian love was never meant to remain private. It always takes visible form. It shows up in ordinary acts of faithfulness, mercy, and service.

So what might that love look like here? What does it look like in ways our neighbors can actually feel—right here in our city, on the streets surrounding this church?

Here are some thoughts: Perhaps love looks like advocating for the marginalized or sitting quietly with the grieving. Perhaps love looks like simply showing up consistently. Perhaps love looks like mentoring the next generation.

I would like to expound on that last suggestion: mentoring.

Lately, former New York Times Op-Ed columnist David Brooks and NYU marketing professor Scott Galloway have been talking about mentoring

youth, especially Gen Z men. Brooks wrote about it in his book *The Second Mountain*, in his lectures, as well as in many of his columns in the New York Times and in The Atlantic. Galloway also mentioned it in several interviews and podcasts. Both make a similar point: many young men today are struggling not for lack of effort, but because too many are growing up without adults to guide them and relationships that help them grow. Brooks says they need communities that shape character and remind them they matter. Galloway adds that they need mentors—coaches, teachers, pastors, employers, and father figures—who can set expectations while offering encouragement. Put simply, young men need adults who will show up consistently, believe in them, and help them become responsible adults.

Mentoring the next generation is one example of what love looks like in action. But whether we're mentoring young people, caring for family, or serving our neighbors, that kind of love requires practice.

To make love a habit, we have to practice it until it becomes part of who we are. We know from the way our brains work that repetition matters. Neuroscience claims that when we do something over and over, the neural connectors of the hippocampus, as they are called, those pathways in our minds get stronger. It's like working out a muscle—at least, that's how my neuroscientist daughter explained it to me.

Jesus might not have used modern scientific terms, but he understood the human heart perfectly. He repeated the theme of love at both the start and the end of this part of his *goodbye speech* because he wanted those to be the last words ringing in the disciples' ears.

And he wants the same final words to echo in our hearts today. He tells us: We are not alone. We are part of a divine union—Father, Son, and Spirit—working through us to transform the world. We are loved.

And because we are loved, we can love in return. Not just in how we feel, but in what we do. Not as a noun, but as a verb!

Thanks be to God. **Amen.**