

God is Love

TEXT: John 13:33-35

Preached by Rev. Anne Robertson at Cranford Memorial UMC at 10:00 a.m. on December 24, 2023

Part of my role as the Executive Director of the Massachusetts Bible Society was to market the Bible studies that I wrote for the organization. That effort put me on a plane each June to staff booths at the national or regional conferences of various denominations including, on alternate years, the General Assembly of the Unitarian Universalists. And let me tell you, there is no greater sales challenge than trying to sell Bible studies to Unitarians.

For sure, there are Christian Unitarians. There are also Buddhist Unitarians, and Pagan Unitarians and Humanist Unitarians and almost anything else you can imagine. Many are my friends, and I've preached in both Christian and Humanist UU churches. What unites them is a commitment to social justice and, in most circles, an almost visceral distrust of the Bible.

The first year I went to their General Assembly, the convention was in New Orleans. I got my booth set up, hanging our large Massachusetts Bible Society sign across the drapes at the back of the booth. People came pouring out of the first session; and no one would even come near my table. In fact, I watched as people saw the sign from a distance and went far out of their way to avoid coming within ten feet. Clearly, I needed another strategy.

The next Assembly was two years later, and I was off to Kansas City. This time, I was ready. In place of the large Massachusetts Bible Society banner was a new banner that read, "Are you a hexakosioihexakontahexaphobiatic?" For the record, that word means the debilitating fear of the number 666, which is the number of the Beast in the book of Revelation.

The UUs are a very highly educated bunch. But I was pretty sure that even their expansive vocabulary would not contain that particular word, and that their need to know what it meant would outweigh their biblical revulsion and bring inquiring minds to my table. It worked.

So now I have people coming to my table; but I still have to make the case for studying the Bible to people who, for the most part, would rather cut off their arms and legs than study what most of them consider to be an irrelevant relic at best and a hateful, bigoted screed opposed to all they stand for at worst. I had lots of fun and interesting conversations, but for our purposes here on this Christmas Sunday, I'm remembering one conversation in particular.

After learning what the word on our sign meant, a man attempted to rebuff further conversation by starting to walk away while saying, "Sorry, I don't believe in God." I stepped out from behind my table, "Do you believe in love?" I asked. He stopped and turned around, clearly caught off guard. "What?"

"Do you believe in love? You may not believe in God, but when you think about whatever guides your own actions and priorities in life, is love at or near the top of that list?" He had stopped moving away and was clearly thinking. He agreed that, yes, love was a driving factor for his decisions. We talked for about 15 minutes.

During that time, I told him that the Bible, in 1 John 4:8, says, "God is love," and that for me meant that God was present and made manifest in acts of love, whether you called that manifestation "God" or "justice," or "generosity," or "mercy," or something else. "If your work for justice is driven by love," I told him, "Then as far as I'm concerned, we share a faith." He left with a sample set of materials.

Here's the thing. On the one hand, my strategy in getting Unitarians interested in Bible study was kind of a Paul-in-Athens moment—the visit detailed in Acts 17 when Paul is able to get the Athenians to hear him out because he connects to where they already are, in their case worshipping an unknown God and giving that God an identity, rather than coming in on a high horse, destroying their statues, and condemning their practices.

But on the other hand, the message that convinced the Unitarian man in Kansas City to engage a conversation and accept a copy of the Bible study is also the message I preach everywhere—inside and outside the church. God is love. Period.

It's the message I preach everywhere because it's the message I first received. Many of you know I was raised in Rhode Island in the North Scituate Baptist Church. When I was fourteen, our youth minister had a problem. Youth Sunday was fast approaching and he didn't have anything prepared. Usually we would do a skit or something; but not that year. So he asked, "Would any of you like to do a sermon?" My hand shot up, and I got the job.

My "sermon," if you can call it that, was essentially a five-minute testimony about my interactions with a very large painting of Jesus in the clouds that graced the church wall near where my family sat in the sanctuary. Since Sunday School always met before church, I spent many Sundays as a child really bored during sermons.

But there was Jesus on the wall just across the aisle, standing in the clouds with his hand stretched out in invitation. So, on many Sundays I passed the time by imagining taking his hand and going off to do the kinds of things Jesus might do; along with some things that I might like to do, too. Jesus seemed cool with that.

After explaining that, I summed it all up by telling them how that painting had been a gateway to experience God's love for me. I told them that God loved all of them in the same way, and that they shouldn't ever be afraid to take Jesus' hand and just go, because the hand of Jesus was the hand of love.

As I finished up, still standing there in the pulpit, God spoke to my heart and said, "This is what I want you to do for the rest of your life. Stand in pulpits and tell people that I love them." I went home and told my parents that God had called me into ministry. I told my minister. By my senior year it was the career goal listed by my name in the yearbook.

Fast forward four years to midnight on Nov. 1, 1980, six months after my college graduation, as I woke to the frantic voice of my mother on the phone to the ambulance pleading, "I can't wake him up! I can't wake him up!" I rushed into the bedroom where my 47-year-old father lay still on the bed with the glassy-eyed stare of death. I fell to my knees and begged God for his life. The answer was "No." But in that moment of "No," I was flooded—absolutely flooded—with peace and a sense that whatever veil there is between here and there was pulled aside to let me know the one true thing in the world.

That thing was love. In what seemed like hours but was only a brief minute, I knew beyond any doubt that love was the only thing that mattered; the only thing there really was; the only thing that would endure beyond the nanosecond that is our earthly life.

That knowledge made it almost impossible to work for about two months. I was a reference assistant at a rare book library at Brown University. It felt utterly meaningless, as did most of the way that everyone I knew spent their time. I wanted to run through the streets shaking people. "How does what you're doing with your life bring more love into the world? How does it nurture loving relationships? If it doesn't do those things, you're wasting your time!"

While, over time, I came again to enjoy my work at the library; what I experienced the night of my father's death made visible to me the mismatch between my job and the calling I had when I was 14. "Stand in pulpits and tell people that I love them."

As I read the Bible, Jesus seems to be delivering the same message. "What must I do to inherit eternal life?" asks the lawyer in Luke 10. Jesus gets him to answer his own question with what Matthew's gospel calls "The Great Commandment:" Love God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength and your neighbor as yourself. "You got it," said Jesus to the lawyer. "Do this and you will live."

Jesus did not say, "Well, wait until after I die and then make sure you can correctly articulate substitutionary atonement." No. The answer was love; and that answer, the Great Commandment, was itself made up of two passages from the Old Testament: Deuteronomy 6:5 and Leviticus 19:18. So it was definitely a great commandment, but it wasn't a new commandment.

The Gospel of John takes that same old message—that it's all about love—and adds some definition, which is what I think makes it a “new commandment.” The Great Commandment, pulled out of Deuteronomy and Leviticus, says it all; but it also leaves lots of room for quibbling about what love looks like in all kinds of specific and complex situations. Right there in Luke 10, the lawyer who gave Jesus the correct answer immediately wants a definition of who, exactly, counts as a “neighbor.”

So, in John 13, Jesus takes the basic love commandment that he, and the lawyer in Luke 10, and any rabbi of the era could have articulated, and provides more concrete guidance. Jesus says, “I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.” Not if you wear a cross; not if you go to church; “if you have love for one another.”

“Love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength and your neighbor as yourself” is the Word of God made into the words of the Old Testament in Deuteronomy 6:5 and Leviticus 19:18. Those words were read, they were taught, they were spoken so frequently that by the first century anyone who studied the Torah could put them together and present them as a summary of all the law and the prophets.

The word made words was a gift that could usher in the peaceable kingdom predicted by Isaiah, and Jesus confirms in Luke 10 that they hold the key to inheriting eternal life. But as much as people turned the words over in their mouths or copied them again and again onto parchment, what that love looked like when lived in the flesh was still largely a mystery.

But God is love, and love will find a way. The Word that was first made words was made flesh. Word 2.0, the interactive version, the embodiment of love in human form, not just to repeat the daily spoken commandment to love God and our neighbors as ourselves, but to make it new by living it out in a way that all could see and understand across the span and complexities of a human life. Not a theoretical human life; a life born in a specific place and time; a life born to poverty in a time of political upheaval and unrest; a life with a name, and that name was Jesus.

The old question, “What would Jesus do?” is, in its way, the “new” part of the “new commandment.” We’ve known since Deuteronomy that the answer is “love,” but it’s by looking to Jesus’ example—the way he loved on earth while living a human life; including enduring the worst that life can throw at you; that can help us apply the Great Commandment to our lives and thereby bear witness to God’s love for the world.

At its most basic level, that’s what Christmas is about—the need to take the words and make them flesh; not to just sing out “Oh, how I love Jesus,” but to take his outstretched hand and say, “Okay, then, let’s go love the word together.” We’ve been following the long thread of hope through Advent.

It’s love that distinguishes the long thread of God’s hope from the many other threads woven throughout the world. Because God is love. 1 John 4 makes it plain. The ones who love are the ones who know God. The ones who don’t love, haven’t got a clue. We know God through the experience of love. Through the loving Word made flesh.

Just as Elizabeth passed the long thread of hope to Mary in Luke 1, so Mary passes it to Jesus by the light of a single star. Jesus then took it out into the world and invited anyone who was willing to go where he went and to love as he loved to take hold of the cord and join him.

But here’s the secret about the long thread of hope. It’s tied at the top of the cross, yes. Those who wish to save their lives must, at some point, be willing to lose them and to hang onto the cord even then. But the cord neither ends nor begins at the cross. In fact, it doesn’t end or begin anywhere. It’s a circle woven both by and with the love of God; and to love even the smallest thing for the smallest period of time, is to touch that divine thread. The hem of his garment.

We don’t leave God to follow it or find God at the end of it. We travel with God along its circumference. That’s the message of Christmas. The Word made flesh. God with us in the circle of life. God agreeing to walk with us and to hold the hope for us when we lose strength and let go; always ready to help and heal us until we’re able to hold onto it again.

The longer we hold on, the more the love woven into its strands will seep into our lives and the easier it will be to hang on when we hit the dry places, the thorny places, and ultimately through the time when we finally agree to just give it all into God's hands. The time when the veil is torn and it becomes crystal clear that love is absolutely the only thing that matters and if it takes a cross, then so be it.

Some first find that cord at the manger, some when they are hungry and experience being fed, some find it in the frigid winter of anxiety when it offers the only warmth, some in times of joy when the wonder of the world seems new, some in the depths of sorrow when the sparkling of the thread is the only light in the dark.

Some make a dramatic choice to grab hold; some just quietly pick it up to see what it's all about. Some take a very long time to take hold of the cord for themselves, but first get a taste of it by touching someone else who is holding on. That touch is called love, and it radiates out from as well as within and around the circle.

So, when a Unitarian man tells me he doesn't believe in God, that matters little to me. The God he doesn't believe in may not be the God I'm talking about anyway. The only sure identifying marker for God is love, "by this everyone will know that you are my disciples, that you have love for one another." So, for me, anyone who loves in ways that Jesus did is hanging onto the same long thread of hope that I am as we travel together around the circle, helping each other when crosses loom, rejoicing with each other in the places where angels sing.

In case we miss it in John's Gospel, John's first letter makes it clear. "Beloved, let us love one another; for love is of God, and anyone who loves is born of God and knows God. The one who doesn't love, doesn't know God, for God is love." Period. Can I interest you in a Bible study? Amen.