

**Pastor Liz's Sermon for May 18, 2025 – 8:00 a.m. service**  
**What the World Needs Now**

This past week was concert week for the women's choir in which I sing. It's usual, after long regular rehearsal, and an even longer dress rehearsal, a pre-concert run-through and then the concert, that snippets of the music become continuous ear worms, especially in the middle of the night. This past week has been no different. At the same time, I was also reflecting on the love commandment. And somehow in the midst of those ear worms, another song inserted itself... *"What the world needs now, is love, sweet love, it's the only thing, that there's just too little of..."* My subconscious must have thought 'great', an entrée into this week's sermon. But the next night, wouldn't you know it, another song wove its way into the medley... *"What's love got to do with it, what's love, but a second-hand emotion?"* So now I had these two love-themed songs floating around in my head.

I've learned to pay attention to subconscious messages. The more I thought about the juxtapositioning of these two pop songs, the clearer it became that they epitomize the great social rift concerning 'love' that we are experiencing in the world. We can regard love cynically, as with *"What's love got to do with it..."* alongside a certain disparagement and contempt, believing that people only do things to help themselves, rather than for good or sincere reasons. Or, on the other hand, we can regard love, *"What the world needs now..."* with a certain unpretentiousness, sincerity and openness. This dichotomy couldn't have been made clearer in an article printed back in February in the National Catholic Observer. Cardinal Robert Prevost, as Pope Leo was then, shared his criticism of Vice President JD Vance. The original controversy stemmed from Vance's statement in a Fox News interview that *"there is a Christian concept that you love your family and then you love your neighbor, and then you love your community, and then you love your fellow citizens, and then after that, prioritize the rest of the world."* Cardinal Prevost wrote, *"JD Vance is wrong: Jesus doesn't ask us to rank our love for others."* In other words, Jesus' command is upfront and clear: we are to love one another as he has loved us.

You see, if we create a pecking order or choose whom we are to love, we create an us-them polarity. It goes something like this: I can love my immediate family but that other family living two doors down, I will love them *if*

there's some love left over. And the families on the other side of town, the ones who lost their homes in the fire, that's in a different community: their neighbours can take care of them. And as for the marginalized, the poor, the homeless, the addicts, the unemployed, the struggling across the country, let the governments which collect our taxes look after them. And as for the world's starving children, persons displaced by war, and... well, that's too big a problem to even contemplate, let alone prioritize. Do you see how easy it is for love to become self-centered, loving my own and pushing others further and further away, as if love really is, cynically speaking, a second-hand emotion? The love that Jesus commands is so different. It doesn't come with a list of exceptions - no asterisks, no footnotes, no conditions, no fine print attached. We are to love as he has loved us - his followers today - just as he loved his disciples then.

How did Jesus love? Unconditionally. We see his love manifest in the context of John's gospel: it is the night of his last supper with his disciples. Jesus knows he will die, and even knowing that Judas will betray him, loves his disciples—all of them—to the utmost. Then he does the unexpected. Getting up from the table, taking off his robe and putting on an apron, he pours water into a basin, and kneeling on the floor in front of each disciple, he washes their feet, Judas included. After he has done this act, he resumes his place at the table and asks his disciples: "*Do you know what I have done to you?*" Jesus has laid down a pattern for them and what he has done for them, they are to do. Even in the face of his imminent betrayal by Judas, Jesus still honours Judas by seating Judas next to himself and handing him a morsel of bread dipped in wine. Shortly after, Judas leaves and the gospel writer poignantly draws attention to a detail that we may overlook: "*...it was night.*" (John 13:30) Jesus does not stop loving Judas but recognizes that Judas has refused the light—has refused Jesus who has come as light into the world—and has chosen to walk in darkness. And yet, the death that Judas has gone out to arrange will reveal on the cross the essence of both the Father and the Son as holy love. The remaining disciples are to be agents of this love. They are to love one another in the same way that Jesus loves them.

Love is the pattern for our lives in Christ Jesus. Love defines us to the world. The prototype of this love is made plain in Leviticus, in the laws given to govern Israel's life as a holy people. Their holiness lies in being related to the holy God

who has called them into a covenant relationship and not from any natural-born quality in themselves. Leviticus is the source of what Jesus identifies as the second great commandment; “...*you shall love your neighbour as yourself...*” (Lev. 19:18)

What does it mean to love your neighbour? Taking the context of this verse into account, loving your neighbour has more to do with action than with emotion. Share the harvest so that the poor and sojourners, temporary residents in a place not their own, can glean and support themselves. Be honest in your dealings with others—no stealing, dealing falsely, lying, or withholding wages. Don’t belittle those with infirmities and challenges. Be impartial and render just judgements in your relationship with both the poor and the wealthy. Don’t defraud your neighbour or slander him or gossip about her. Don’t hate the other person but reason with them in a conflict; neither seek vengeance nor harbour grudges. And don’t think these laws are for only those inside your community for v. 33-34 reads: “*When a stranger temporarily stays with you in your land, you shall not do that person wrong. The stranger who sojourns with you shall be to you as the native among yourself, and you shall love that person as yourself; for you were strangers in the land of Egypt: I am the Lord your God.*” (Lev. 19:33-34)

Jesus, at the last supper, obeys these laws as he interacts with Judas. There’s no hate, no vengeance, no grudge in his voice, just a recognition of the choice Judas is about to make and the enormous consequences that will follow Judas’ choice. In that sense, Jesus takes this commandment to love your neighbour as yourself a step further. His disciples are to love one another as he has loved them. That is, they are to humbly serve each other, as exemplified in Jesus’ washing of the disciples’ feet, putting the needs of others before their own, even to the point of sacrificial, forgiving love as they will see embodied in his death on the cross. This is how everyone will recognize Jesus’ disciples when they see the love that the disciples have for each other and their neighbours.

We here at St. Peter’s are a holy community. People outside of the holy community really do watch us. They’re watching to see if we take the words of Jesus seriously. They’re watching to see if we *really* love our neighbours as ourselves. They realize that these are radical words—love your neighbour as

yourself: radical because it's a whole different way to live, loving people, all people, not just people in our holy community. But that's not how most of the world operates. The people outside are watching because they haven't always seen this love in us. They haven't always seen Jesus' followers as loving their neighbours as themselves. By times, they've seen the holy community standing off to the side, taking care of their own, judging those on the outside. And yet, despite, all this, they have also seen our love in action, love that provokes questions such as, "*Why are you doing this for me? What's in it for you, follower of Jesus?*" Or as Tertullian, who lived from about 155 to 220 AD, a convert to Christianity and an important early Christian theologian, observed, "*Look how they love one another!*"

Mutual love within the holy community is not an alternative to love for neighbours outside the community but is the foundation for such love. The command to love one another is given with an eye on the rest of the world: "*By this everyone will know that you are my disciples.*"

When I was serving a congregation back in Ontario, a friend of mine was dying of cancer. She was a single mom. Her teenage son was living with his father at the time, so she was on her own. Her greatest fear was that she would die alone. Word of her fear got out to the women in her congregation about the same time that she was admitted to the palliative care unit at the local hospital. And here is the crux of the story: no questions asked, the women, in pairs, took turns sitting with her, twenty-four hours a day. They were gathered around her when she died. I remember one day stopping at the nurses' station before I entered her room to ask how she was doing. Clergy could do that back then. The nurse looked at me and then looked toward the open door of the hospital room. "*I don't know what's going on in there,*" she said, "*but out here we can feel it. Something's different. It feels like so much love.*" That's the way love in action works within the holy community and outwards into the world around it.

Jesus says, "*A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another; even as I have loved you, that you also love one another. By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.*" (John 13:34-35). His words are both a challenge and a promise. They challenge us to

reflect Jesus' love in our daily lives and promise that such love will serve as a testimony to the world, a world that so needs our love right now.

Amen

**Blessing** (To Bless the Space Between us: A Book of Blessings by John O'Donohue)

May you live your days compassionate of heart, clear in word, gracious in awareness, courageous in thought, generous in love, and may God, Father, + Son, and Holy Spirit bless you and keep you always in their love. Amen