

Divine Love

John 15: 9-17

Delivered: First Presbyterian Church of San Anselmo, CA

A few weeks ago, I found myself scanning across the local radio dial in my car on a trip to San Jose when I came across a new radio station which was playing music from the 1990s. While I was in middle school in the 1990s, it was also when I started getting into music. And one of those bands I found myself enjoying at that time was called The Dave Matthews Band.

If you haven't heard of The Dave Matthews Band, they are a band predominately from the 1990s which are known for being an alternative rock band who use a lot of non-traditional musical instruments ranging from violins, fiddles, and flutes in their music. While the majority of themes in DMB songs vary, a lot of their songs deal with issues like appreciations of life to more human justice issues, from violence and racism. But one of my favorite songs from the band is called "Everyday."

The music video for this song is also probably one of the best music videos out there as well.

While the video only has the band members singing the song in the background, the video shows a stocky, yet warm-hearted, geekish looking man in his 30s on the streets of New York City going up to strangers and offering to give people hugs. At the beginning of the video, the young man is finding it difficult for people hug him. After all, making eye contact with strangers is something hard to do in New York City, let alone hugging strangers. But after awhile, a clean cut man goes up to him, takes up his offer, and hugs him. A few moments later, an older woman in her 80s hugs him. Then a group of young African American men playing basketball hugs him followed by a group of tough New York

Firefighters, to even a skeptical, yet willing, late-night talk show host Conan O'Brien who hugs him when the young man walks onto his set. While this video is simple and doesn't contain any scripted words, fancy action scenes, or flashy graphics, it shows us just everyday people, everyday strangers, loving one another as the band sings the song with the lyrics in the background, "All You Need Is, All You Want Is, All You Need Is, Love. Everyday."

This morning our scripture is all about love. In this passage that Martha and I have read for you, we find ourselves at a point in John where we see Jesus talking with his disciples not only about God's love for them but also their need to love others. In a sense, Jesus is painting a pattern for them.

A pattern that is saying that as God has loved him (Jesus) he, in turn, loves them. And since he loves them, they should not only remember that love Jesus has for them, but they should also pass this love onto others. "As God has loved me, so I loved you," Jesus said. "This is my command, Love one another."

I am sure all of us here have at one point or another have seen T-shirt shirts or bumper stickers which read, "Jesus Loves You," or even sung this simple song at Sunday School or Vacation Bible School in your youth with the same title. In fact, when noted theologian Karl Barth was once asked about his most profound discovery of God, he surprised an audience of listeners by answering them by singing, "Jesus loves me, yes I know for the bible tells me so."

But while everyone has heard and knows the phrase "Jesus Loves You," the truth is, do we really believe it? Granted, we have been reminded of it by slogans, the silly songs, and even those charismatic late-night cable televangelists. But is it really true? Are we really loved by God? Am I Loved by God?

Despite this question sounding so simple, the reality is this: it's a question that many people are struggling to answer. Every day, people ask themselves, "If God really loves me, then why do I feel so much guilt in my life? If God loves me, then why do I live with so much regret? If God loves me, why do people say I am going to Hell for who I am?"

And while we know we live in a fallen world where sometimes there is anything but love every day, we also find ourselves struggling to understand why is it that sometimes we see people who talk about God's love and the need for us to love others but it sure doesn't appear that they are doing it themselves? Much more, if God's love is supposed to be unconditional, then why is it sometimes presented by many as being conditional much like a contract—only being offered to a selected people who hold up their end of a bargain to do select things.

Recently, Rob Bell, a Christian author, and pastor wrote a book entitled "Love Wins." The premise of the book outlines Bell's view that many have distorted the idea of God's love and forgiveness by making it seeming conditional, something that only can be obtained by those who believe in Jesus Christ as their Lord and Savior.

In his book, Bell writes, "First, I believe that Jesus's story is first and foremost about the love of God for every single one of us. It is a stunning, beautiful, expansive love, and it is for everybody, everywhere. That's the story. "For God so loved the world . . ." That's why Jesus came. That's his message. That's where the life is found."

While Bell's book has gained a wide popularity and much-needed press, it also has gained tremendous criticism and Bell himself has also received a great deal hateful responses for his theology of unconditional love, not by those outside of Christianity, but from those in the Christian community.

Bell's argument about God loving and accepting all has brought him so much response from people who not only reject Bell as being a heretic and preaching a perverted gospel but has him labeled by many as being a man who is leading people to Hell for his views on God's love.

Even though this is such a bold statement by many who say that preaching

unconditional love is an unforgivable sin, we must take a moment and ask ourselves, does even unconditional love exist in the first place? And if so, where did unconditional love come from?

One of the ways in which theologian John Calvin often described our relationship with God was that of a loving parent who loves their child. While there are many other ways to view God, I often like Calvin's imagery of God because it provides for us an imagery of how God loves us in our own lives. And even though Calvin discussed the loving parent as being a father or a mother, I think it would be safe to use a person as a loving parent with anyone who believed in us, who unconditionally loved us, and someone who no matter what we did in life, was always there for us.

Maybe for some of you, it was your father, maybe for others, it was your mother. Or maybe it was an uncle, an aunt, or maybe an older sibling. Regardless, whomever that person was in your life who always embraced you with love, it's this love we felt from that person, the love we shared with that a person, and the love that despite no matter what may have come between the both of you, that continued to exist because it was a love that couldn't be restricted, relegated, or revoked.

It was a love that was always real and a type of love that was always unconditional.

Recently, I heard a story on the public radio program, "This American Life" about a man named Roger who was from the inner city neighborhoods of Baltimore. The man, in his late 30s, grew up without a father and was raised by his mother. While Roger had a great deal of love for his mother, he spoke about how much he had hurt her when he was younger by getting into trouble. "At first, in my early teens I was into stealing," he said. "Later, I found myself getting into drugs, and then into the Baltimore city gangs. And when my mother tried to convince me to get help, I didn't listen to her because I was mad. And even though she had patience for awhile, she eventually turned me into the police after she learned of a shooting I was involved in. During most of the time I was locked up, I had nothing but anger towards her, anger that she betrayed me and didn't love me anymore. But you know something," he added. "She never stopped loving me. Even when I told her that I hated her and hoped she would die, she still loved me. And after all, I have been through in my life, after all the hate I felt, she was the only one who continued to love me unconditionally. That is what love is."

While theologians, scholars, and those in the church will continue to argue about the conditions one must receive God's love for many years to come, the reality is this: even in our world, the world filled with brokenness, despair, anger and hate even by those in our own religion, unconditional love exists. All of us here at some one point or another have seen this unconditional love in our own lives.

Maybe for you, it was seeing a way someone forgave you when you did something wrong, maybe it was a way someone reached out to you when you were in terrible need, maybe it was someone who nurtured and comforted you when everyone else turned their back on you. Whoever this person may be, no matter what the circumstances were, in this moment in life, you saw unconditional love, unconditional acceptance, unconditional hope.

This my friends are what God's love is like. A loving parent who loves us no matter who we are, no matter what we may say or no matter how angry may be —like Roger's mother, our God never stops loving us.

And if we can see it in the lives of those who mean so much to us, then we know it must have come from somewhere. Because unconditional love, a love that surrounds us no matter how fallen or broken we may be, can only come from someone who has no limit, no restrictions, no required merits on how much they can love us. Because love is everlasting, it's always open, it's always forgiving. And it's so strong that even Jesus gave a son to die for us so that we could have such an unconditional, such divine love.

And while sometimes it may require bumper sticker slogans, silly songs, do whatever you can to remember that God loves you. Even remember the words of Fred Rogers, from Mr. Rogers Neighborhood who once said, "when I tell children at the end of my program they are special, I mean it. Because they made it a special day by just being you. There's no person in the whole world like you.

And God loves you just the way you are." May it be so for you and also for me. Amen.

Bibliography

Feasting on the Word: preaching the Revised common lectionary. By David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor. Louisville (Ky.): Westminster John Knox Press, 2011. N. pag. Print.

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