

An old physician, Doctor Gordon Geezer, became bored in retirement and decided to open a medical clinic. He put a sign up outside that said: "Dr. Geezer's clinic. Get your treatment for \$500 – if not cured, get back \$1000." Doctor Digger Young, who was positive that this old Geezer didn't know beans about medicine, thought this would be a great opportunity to get \$1000. So he went to Dr. Geezer's clinic. He said: "Dr. Geezer, I have lost all taste in my mouth. Can you please help me?" Dr. Geezer asked his assistant: "Nurse, please bring medicine from Box 22 and put 3 drops in Dr. Young's mouth." Dr. Young receives the medicine and gags: "Aaaagh! This is Gasoline!" Dr. Geezer: "Congratulations! You've got your taste back. That will be \$500."

Dr. Young gets annoyed and goes back after a couple of days, figuring to recover his money. Dr. Young says "I have lost my memory, I cannot remember anything." Dr. Geezer says: "Nurse, please bring medicine from Box 22 and put 3 drops in the patient's mouth." Dr. Young protests: "Oh no you don't – that's Gasoline!" Dr. Geezer: "Congratulations! You've got your memory back. That will be \$500."

Dr. Young, now having lost \$1000, leaves angrily and comes back after several more days. This time Dr. Young says: "My eyesight has become weak – I can hardly see anything!" Dr. Geezer replies: "Well, I don't have any medicine for that, so here's your \$1000 back" – and hands the young doctor a \$10 bill. Dr. Young cries: "But this is only \$10!" "Congratulations! You got your vision back! That will be \$500." Don't mess with old people!

OK, first some background on our gospel. Jesus speaks His last words around the table -- against a backdrop of a coming crucifixion. He who has loved His disciples will now dramatically demonstrate the depth of that love.

At this point in John's gospel, we are close to the end of Jesus' life. We have every reason to believe that Jesus' words here will be among the most important because they are, presumably, His last words. Jesus speaks about His glorification that is to come (Jn 13:31-32), but some glorification it will be – His death and resurrection. Jesus' 'glorification' will also be a glorification of God. As is usual in the Gospel of John, words have double meanings. We hear 'glory' and think of the world's conventional definitions of glorification. We will hear Jesus speak of 'love' and be surprised to discover that the 'love' of which He speaks is different from our conventional meanings of 'love.'

The key to understanding a biblical definition of love is Leviticus 19:18: Love of God and neighbor. In this Sunday's Gospel, the neighbor to be loved is the one seated next to us at the table. Jesus is asking His followers to love one another, for there to be love among the inner circle of Jesus' followers. Many have noted that in the Gospel of John, 'love' is decidedly 'in-house' love. It's why we need all 4 gospels. It is in Matthew where Jesus says "love your enemies." (Matt 5), but John's Jesus commands us to "love one another."

Even those who know little of our Christian faith probably know the command to love one another. But what's 'new' about this commandment? The command to love is part of the historic faith of Israel and is unsurprisingly found in many of the world's other religions. Jesus says that this love is part of the Christian witness. The world will know Jesus' people by our love. John continues this conversation about love for several chapters – we are in chapter 13, and this will continue through the beginning of chapter 16 (v.4)

Jesus calls His disciples “My children” only here. Jesus is leaving His disciples, and He speaks to them with a parental tone, telling them that they will have Him with them for only a little while longer but that still they must love. Jesus says that those who love Him, His inner circle, His disciples, will keep His word. Love is a command, but it is also the source of obedience. They are commanded to love even to the point of giving their lives for each other (15:12-13) (adapted from Willimon, PULPIT RESOURCE, April-June 2019, p. 21)

Second, what I’m going to call a bit of a theology of love. Mother Teresa said “I have found a paradox – that if you love until it hurts, there can be no more hurt, only more love.” What’s amazing to me is even though the command to love is at the center of our faith – we are not really known for our great love. We’re known more for our judging, moralizing and obsession with the issues of abortion and homosexuality. It’s painfully ironic that we try to form children in Faith Formation Classes, but we rarely sit down with them and ponder just what in the world love means. Love is a word that is incessantly used, for a bewildering array of people and objects, and we simply assume that we all mean the same things by the word. One way to begin to understand love is to see it in an ever-widening spectrum of circles of concern, reaching out at its most intense to the beloved, to family, to friends, to acquaintances, to strangers, to the homeless in Wake County, to those in war-torn areas of our world, and to those who live down the street. And let’s not forget God.

We need to start with a love that no one could deny is the genuine article. The prime analogy – the model against which all uses of the word ‘love’ should be tested – is the love of long-time spouses, who have shared miscarriages, unpayable bills, colic, midnight diapers, teething, the terrible two’s, defiant teens, and the whole gamut – and yet still say, “You’re the only one I want to spend my life with.” Genuine love is very UNdramatic, commonplace, everyday: buying the groceries love, letting go of the grudge love, giving up my preference love. I yield in something, even though I get nothing out of it, because it will make you happier.

From that we can distill the essence of genuine love. Love is NOT a feeling; it’s an act of the will. Real love kicks in when the feelings FAIL, when the beloved is no longer even likable. Is that what we mean when we say, “But we really love one another?” Real love says, “I take permanent responsibility for you, even when it’s inconvenient.” Love is a commitment without loophole clauses. And by definition, when we are trying to ‘keep our options open,’ we’re not getting it at all. (adapted from BECOMING A CATECHIST, William J. O’Malley, p. 112-113) And of course, as disciples of Christ, we always circle back to the cross when we think about love. That was the greatest act of love of all of history. It didn’t feel good at all. But it was the real deal, and brought us here to this very moment today.

Third, an example of this gospel kind of love. Jesus’ commandment of love can be most difficult when it comes to those we love most; when our patience is all but gone, when our hurt is most raw, when our frustration and exhaustion make us most susceptible to striking back. But our very identity as disciples of Christ is centered in such persistent and constant love. And it becomes our glory.

The phone rings for the 6th time in less than an hour. She knows who it is. It’s her mother – again. It’s 8:00 on a cold spring night. It has been a long day: her 5-year-old has been a handful since she got up, and she herself has been on crutches for 7 weeks, recovering from surgery.

A stroke claimed her mother’s brain, leaving her dogged by paranoia and in a fog of dementia. Every call is a challenge: the same conversation again and again, the same reassurance that her mom is not to be evicted from her home, the same insisting that she had just been to see her mother just the day before.

She held it together for the first 5 calls, but she doesn't think she can handle a sixth. But she picks up the phone again. Her patience deserts her and she quickly finds herself yelling at her mother – or the woman who used to be her mother.

Worn out, she flops on the couch, frustrated and angry – at herself. That's when her 5-year-old comes over and asks, "Can I talk to Granma Ellie?" She hands over the phone to her daughter. "Hi Grandma!" She hears her mother exclaim through the receiver. "Sweetheart! How are you? Did you go to school today?"

What is this? All she said was "Hi Grandma" and her mother sounds like a person fully alert to the heartbeat of a normal day. "Yes Grandma, and today was share day and I brought my Wonder Woman bracelets." "Can you put it on speaker?" she whispers to her daughter.

She obliges, and out of the phone comes a waterfall of good cheer. Her mother tells her how much she loves her and how lovely her voice sounds. Then: "I hope I'll see you soon?" Her mother makes her plea for a promise of companionship. Suddenly she hears her mother's voice differently now. She softens as she watches her little girl handle her fragile grandmother with such a deft touch.

"Grandma, we are taking you to the carousel this weekend. I'm going on the frog and you can go on the horse next to me." "Oh, that's wonderful darling!"

"Tell me, did you go to school today?" She already asked that, but her daughter doesn't miss a beat. "Yes Grandma, I went to school and we had share day. I brought my Wonder Woman bracelets." "You did? How wonderful!" "Do you want me to sing you a song? I know three songs from 'Annie.'"

And then the little girl sings.

It is an epiphany for the mother. She writes: "I listen to my daughter crooning to her grandmother, caring for her with exquisite patience. I spend so much time wishing she had a 'real' grandmother, wishing she knew my 'real' mother. In this moment, I see that she does have a real grandmother, and she does have a real relationship with her...."

"When they hang up, after many kissing noises, I tell my daughter it is bath time. She wildly protests, but I draw the bath anyway. I am still Mommy after all, and she is still 5. And yet tonight, she taught me how to answer the phone like a grown-up. With love." (from CONNECTIONS, May 2019, p. 3)

May we love one another – as Christ loved us. Amen.