

John 15:9-17

I had so many preaching options today.

Today is Mothers Day, so I could have preached about Mothers.

Today is a Rogation Sunday, and I thought it could be a good opportunity to preach about God's loving providence in the world around us.

Or I could preach about love...again.

We hear a lot about love in church. The story is often told of the pastor who was surprised when a parishioner with whom he had never hit it off congratulated him after service on his excellent historical sermon. When he asked what she liked about it, she told him, "You finally preached a sermon that wasn't all about love." Our Presiding Bishop, Michael Curry, talks about love every waking moment.

But love is what it's all about, everything, from mothers to mother nature, finds its focus and being in love. "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.' All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments." "This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you." "No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends." The whole bible is full of love

And yet we don't like to hear about love all the time. John tells us the commandment is not burdensome, but hearing about it all the time might be. It's a short commandment, easy to memorize, but not always easy to follow. It is not clear and unambiguous. It leaves too much up to us.

How do we love? What and Whom do we love? Who is our neighbor?

There is a reason people fight protracted, expensive legal battles to display the 10 commandments on public property, but never have I heard of an instance when someone has wanted to post "Love one another as I have loved you" on the courthouse wall.

Part of the problem, as I have said is that it's just too squishy, even trying to describe love is like nailing Jello to the wall. In order to follow Jesus commandment, we actually have to think, to make our own decisions, to take responsibility for our own actions.

With the ten commandments, God has done the work for us. "Thou shalt not steal" requires little thought. It's easy.

Are you familiar with *Les Miserables*? In it a character, Jean Valjean, was imprisoned because he stole a loaf of bread to help feed his family. Was he loving his family or was he breaking a commandment? The answer, of course, is yes.

What would you do if your family were starving? Which commandment would you obey? Sometimes there is no way around the question, do you show love, or do you obey the letter of the law. We know what Jesus did, he healed people on the Sabbath. Love always, always, always takes precedence over the law.

But isn't always that clear. Do you love your family, or do you love the neighbor from whom you might steal a loaf? Stealing is not showing love, but in this world, it might sometimes be the least bad choice. And the same is true for the other commandments. The world is broken, and we cannot live in it, we cannot love in it, without sin. But in the love of Christ, we have overcome the world.

Why is love so important? Why does Jesus put so much stress on it? I think it's because love takes us out of the world and into the kingdom of God. Every time we love, every time we are loved, we live for a bit more in the kingdom of Heaven. Remember what John's first letter has been telling us for the last few weeks, God is love, if we live in love, we live in God. It isn't just that love is a nice thing, a friendly thing. It is that love changes everything.

After Jean Valjean had been paroled, he attempted to steal silver from Bishop Myriel.

When he was caught with it by the police, looking at Jean, the Bishop loved him, and told the police that he had given Jean the silver. Not only does Jean now have a treasure, suddenly, in love, he is also without sin in the matter. Everything in his life is different. Love has set him free not only from poverty, but from the need to sin, as a part of the world's broken system.

There is a child starving to death somewhere in Somalia. What if every other person in the world loved that child as Jesus loves us? What if every other person in the world would willingly die to ensure that that child lived? Not only would the child have enough, he would overcome the world. How much harder would it be, for that child to be radicalized or turn to piracy, or human trafficking?

Somewhere in this city, there is a person who, through her own fault, has lost job after job and relies on public assistance to raise her four children. What if every person in the world was willing not only to forgive her, but to lay down their lives to help her hold down a job and raise her family? Would she retreat into drugs and alcohol? Would she

turn to theft or prostitution to support her children? How would that kind of love not only change her, but the whole world in which she lives?

That sounds a lot like the kingdom of God to me.

Love may be hard to take hold of and define, but like water or fire or wind, love is strength and power, love is the one truly real thing we can grasp, love will conquer the world, love is the essence of God.

We are not a people of thou shalt and thou shalt not.

"This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you."

This command is not burdensome.

It is everything.