

“Love One Another As I Have Loved You”

- I. Introduction: Jesus said “This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you.” Radical love is at the heart of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. We can trivialize the notion of love, but for Christ the kind of love he was talking about in John cost him his life. Christ’s love underpins much of Paul’s writing. This is particularly true in the book of Philippians. While writing this book, Paul sat in prison unsure of whether he would ever be released. Paul’s dismal situation made the following words even more poignant “Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others.” In these words I believe Paul was operationalizing Christ’s mandate to love one another.

- II. The Church As A Place of Love. Paul understood that the church had been created by Christ in order to multiply Christ’s love and then to extend that love throughout the world. In order to do that, the church had to embody Christ. In each local place where the church comes together, such as at the Church of the Ascension, we have the opportunity and the challenge to be the Body of Christ. Fueling this whole process of becoming the Body of Christ is the love that we receive from our God. Our challenge is to try not to hang onto that love for ourselves, but rather to give it away to one another and to those around us. One of the things we learn very quickly about Christian love is that it really differs from love as the world often defines it. The world tends to lump together love and pleasure. In the world we tend to love what we like and we tend to like what makes us feel good. However, because feelings can change fairly rapidly and frequently our human love can be unstable and in many ways self-serving. In contrast, there are several qualities about Christian love that are distinctive:

First, our love as Christians is to be modeled after Christ’s love. Christ’s love towards us is unconditional. Christ loves us for who we are as well as for who we could be. Second, we also know from Christ that loving thoughts and loving feelings are nothing without loving action. In other words, we are not only to feel loving, but also we are to be loving.

And, our love as Christians is to be very intentional. By that I mean that we are to commit ourselves to systematically demonstrate our love. There are many programs that have been designed to help us do that. One of them is the Stephen Ministry Program. As you may have learned today in Sunday School, in the past 30 years over

10,000 congregations of all denominations, including now the Church of the Ascension, have become Stephen Ministry churches. Leaders participate in intensive training about developing this program in their parishes. Recently, Amy Morehouse and Jane Phillips completed this training, and several years ago Peg and I also did so. Parishioners who feel called to become a Stephen Minister undergo training in their local church to discover and use the spiritual gifts they have been blessed with in order to provide compassionate care to others. They are then assigned a person in their parish to provide such care. Stephen Ministers meet with those who are elderly, lonely, or ill, and those experiencing grief or having family problems. Through this program lay persons become partners with clergy in ministering to their brothers and sisters.

- III. An Example of Christian Love. I'd like to share an example of Christian love at work through a Stephen Minister at St. Thaddeus in Aiken, South Carolina. She has given me permission to share her experience with others. One of my responsibilities at St. Thaddeus was to begin a Stephen Ministry Program, which included being trained as one of six program leaders, recruiting and training Stephen Ministers, and matching ministers with those in the parish who had a need that could be met through this ministry. There was an elderly widow in the parish, we will call her Virginia, who lived alone in a retirement community, having lost her husband some years earlier. She had multiple, deteriorating health problems, and was mostly homebound. I visited with her and brought her home communion, but knew that she needed more pastoral care than I could provide.

At the same time there was a newly trained Stephen Minister, Betty, who was ready for assignment. Betty agreed to meet with Virginia. Betty agreed, but was unsure of what she could do to be helpful. She began meeting weekly with Virginia. She relied on her training, was intentional in her own spiritual disciplines, and prayed that she would have something of value to offer Virginia. She recognized Virginia's loneliness and isolation and began to write her a letter each week as well as to visit her. Betty and Virginia became closer and closer to one another. There were increasingly difficult times in Virginia's life. Her health deteriorated further, and she was required to move to a facility with a higher level of care, leaving behind friends she had made. She was rarely able to go out, but Betty would take her for a drive when Virginia was able. These two Christian sisters met and talked about what it was like to grow old and what it was like for an outgoing social person such as Virginia to be isolated in her small apartment. They read scripture and prayed together. These were things that Betty had not done with anyone before, but which she'd learned to do as a Stephen Minister. When Virginia was unable to leave the facility for church services, Betty started to include a sermon from the web site of our parish in Kingsport, St. Christopher's, each week in her letter. St. Thaddeus had not yet begun to post a Sunday sermon on its web site. Virginia began the practice of rising early each

Sunday morning, dressing up as if she were going to church, and worshiping as the sun was coming up. She sat by the window of her small room with the sun streaming in and had church by herself, using her prayer book and her weekly sermon from St. Christopher's, provided to her by Betty. Who would have imagined, that week after week, a woman in South Carolina prayed and meditated using the sermons a volunteer in Kingsport, TN had faithfully entered each week on his parish web page. With Betty as the intermediary, the sermons found their way to Virginia.

The weekly visits continued. Some months later, Betty received a call from Virginia's daughter, letting Betty know that Virginia was not feeling well and urging Betty to visit her as soon as possible. Betty went immediately. By the time she arrived at Virginia's room, the situation had worsened. Emergency services had been called, but while Betty and Virginia waited for medical help, Virginia went home to be with her Lord. She opened her eyes just before she died and told Betty that she saw someone coming to meet her. Virginia was not alone at the end of this life or at the beginning of the next. Her Christian friend was present with her and had been present with her, gently loving her and being Christ to her. Betty, who had begun this relationship wondering what she had to offer, walked with someone she'd come to love through a very sacred space. If you have been present with someone at the time of death, you know the sacredness of these moments.

- IV. Conclusion. I share this story about Betty and Virginia this morning because I want you to have a sense of what can happen through the Stephen Ministry Program. When we step out in love to serve one another, we receive the power we need from Christ who strengthens us. We are blessed through the relationships that develop through the sacred experiences that we share. So often we begin our ministries as givers and find that we are the ones being blessed.

Christ commanded us to love one another as we have been loved by him. Betty stepped out in faith as she discerned that Christ was calling her to a new ministry. She felt doubt and inadequacy as she began the Stephen Ministry training program, and, despite her newly developed skills and understanding, she sometimes still felt doubt and inadequacy as she met with Virginia. Yet she was willing to offer herself in love, to be Christ's hands and feet, to join with another Christian sister in her week-to-week struggles, to be fully present with her, and to love her.

This morning I invite you to consider becoming a Stephen Minister. In addition, we need several more Stephen Ministry Team Leaders. But whether or not we are called to become Stephen Ministers, we are all called to know one another's stories and challenges and to love one another in active, radical ways. This radical love characterized the early church and was one of the reasons it grew so dramatically. We, you and I, have the wonderful opportunity to be the eyes, the ears, the hands, and the feet of Christ in this place. May the Holy Spirit give us the wisdom and the courage to create an ever more loving Christian community here at the Church of the Ascension. Amen.