

FOUNDATIONS FOR
LAITY RENEWAL

Transforming Daily Life

719 Earl Garrett Street
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Three Sermon Outlines on

Work and Faith

Called to Love

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SERMON NOTES

***The
High Calling
of Our
Daily Work***

*Making a real living connects you to a bigger picture,
a grand design, an abundant life.*

*Each of us has only a small part to play, but what a part!
It's the high calling of our daily work.*

– Howard Butt, Jr., of Laity Lodge
TheHighCalling.org

Sermon 2: The Tricky Part of Love

John 13:31-35

When Judas had gone out, Jesus said, “Now the Son of Man has been glorified, and God has been glorified in him. If God has been glorified in him, God will also glorify him in himself and will glorify him at once. Little children, I am with you only a little longer. You will look for me; and as I said to the Jews so now I say to you, ‘Where I am going, you cannot come.’ I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.”

Theological Point: God calls us to a life of love that is deeper than human feelings or emotions. Love is a committed, thoughtful decision to serve God and our neighbors. This kind of love compels us to work for the well-being of all people—those whom we find easy to love and those whom we find difficult to love.

Introduction: What does it mean to love?

- A. Our Shadow Side**
- B. Love Is Not a Feeling**
- C. Love Is a Decision**

Conclusion: “Love one another”

Introduction: What does it mean to love? “*When Judas had gone out*” may be the best way to open the sermon I am proposing on John 13:31-35. The occasion was Jesus’ last meal with his disciples the night before he died. Jesus had just spoken of his betrayal, “I tell you, one of you will betray me” (John 13:21). When asked who it would be, Jesus indicated it was Judas son of Simon Iscariot (13:26). Then right after Judas left the room Jesus gave his disciples “a new commandment, that you love one another” (v. 34).

“*When Judas had gone out.*” The contrast between the darkness of Judas’ betrayal and Jesus’ commandment to love is a contrast that goes to the heart of the challenge to love. How do we love people we find hard to love? That’s the question for this sermon.

One might open the sermon something like this: When Judas had gone out, the betrayal of Jesus was set in motion. It was the night before Jesus died. There was no turning back now. Jesus was left sitting at table with his disciples. This was Jesus’ last opportunity to say what he wanted to say. And what he said to his disciples was simple: “I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another.”

But what does it mean to “love one another”? What is this love of which Jesus speaks?

A. Our Shadow Side. We have all found it difficult to love certain people or to love them in certain circumstances. One way to explore this is to talk about the psychological concept of our “shadow side.” In Jungian psychology, the “shadow aspect” is part of the unconscious mind consisting of repressed weakness, shortcomings, and instincts. Jung said everyone carries a “shadow.” He believed it functions as “a reservoir for human darkness” (and interestingly, as the seat of creativity).

Without treating all the nuances and complexity of the theory, I have sometimes used the “shadow” concept to talk about our human sin and brokenness. Most of us have our wonderful side—our best self—that is easy for others to love. Each of us also has our “shadow side” that is difficult for others to love. Our shadow side is born of our inner struggles, our self-centered fears and insecurities, our unhealthy desires, our need to control. This is one psychological way of talking about what the Bible calls our sin and brokenness.

When our shadow side speaks and acts, we often hurt or offend others. We treat them unjustly or with a lack of compassion. They see us at our worst. We’re acting not as God intended us to be, but out of our human propensity to sin. When that happens, it’s harder for people to love us or for us to love others.

To illustrate this, think of an example from your own experience when you found it hard to love another person or they found it hard to love you. What were the circumstances? The example might be from your marriage and family life, your workplace, neighborhood or community. How did one or both of you act out of your brokenness toward the other? How did your shadow sides express themselves? Share the story if it's appropriate to share. There are also of course abundant illustrations of this problem throughout history among racial, ethnic, religious groups, and nations.

In preaching, I believe strongly in using illustrations out of our personal lives whenever possible. They are more real. Because they happened to us, people can usually identify with them more readily. I'm reminded of a story I once told in a sermon to illustrate another point, but it is a good example of our shadow sides.

A week before our wedding, my fiancé Debra and I were in the county courthouse in Waco, Texas. At the end of a long week and a long day we had gone to the courthouse to get our marriage license. We were attending to all those last stressful wedding details: the flowers, dresses, tuxes, the reception, travel, and so on. After a wonderful, romantic courtship and engagement, our wedding day had almost arrived.

A few minutes earlier we had a frustrating encounter with a clerk in the County Clerk's office. Now we were alone in an old rickety elevator. Debra was wearing Red Wing steel-toed work boots. Suddenly she stepped back, lifted her leg, and kicked the elevator door as hard as she could. The thunder reverberated up and down the elevator shaft and rumbled through the building. It also struck terror into my soul!

Here was my bride-to-be, days before our wedding, kicking elevator doors as hard as she could! I had not seen her that angry. I had not seen that side of her. In my fear, I suddenly imagined living the rest of my life with a wild woman kicking doors—or worse! So I reacted. I stuck my nose in the air and said one of the most naïve things I've ever said in my life: "Well, I hope that's never directed at me." Wrong thing to say. From the look on her face, I knew Debra now was not happy with me either. "Self-righteous" and "sanctimonious" would probably be the best adjectives to describe what I said and the way I said it. That was not my best side in that moment! Both of us had reacted out of our shadow selves.

We left the courthouse in silence that afternoon, walked to the car in silence, and drove across town in silence. It so happened that we were scheduled for a premarital counseling session that night. It was a long but timely session. We talked about anger and dealing with conflict, and we talked about the meaning of love.

B. Love Is Not a Feeling. In our culture, love is primarily regarded as a feeling. Popular music, movies, novels, and other media commonly portray love as physical and emotional attraction and good feelings toward others. We all know how easy it is to love people whom we like, find attractive, and have much in common. But the tricky part of love, the difficult part, is also to love those people whom we don't particularly like or find attractive. This is especially true when we act toward one another out of our shadow sides.

One of the helpful insights from modern psychology is the understanding that love is not simply a feeling. Although love often involves wonderful feelings, genuine love is first and foremost a commitment and act of the will. A few years ago, psychologist M. Scott Peck put it this way:

"Genuine love is volitional rather than emotional. The person who truly loves does so because of a decision to love. This person has made a commitment to be loving whether or not the loving feeling is present . . . True love is not a feeling by which we are overwhelmed. It's a committed, thoughtful decision" (*The Road Less Traveled*, New York, Simon & Schuster, 1978, p. 119).

C. Love Is a Decision. Scott Peck was saying what Christian theologians have said for centuries. The Bible calls us to a life of love that is profoundly deeper than any human feelings or emotions. In the biblical sense, love is not primarily a feeling or emotion; it's an act of the human will. Love is a committed, thoughtful decision to love and serve both God and our neighbor. This love compels us to work for the well-being of others even when it means sacrificing our own well-being. This is the grace-filled *agape* love of which the Scriptures speak.

I know of no better illustration of this love than Jesus' own life and ministry. Throughout his life, Jesus reached out in love and compassion to everyone he met—tax collectors and sinners, rich and wealthy rulers, women regarded as second-class citizens, self-righteous scribes and Pharisees, despised Samaritans, unclean lepers, blind, and sick people. Jesus taught, “Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you . . .” (Matthew 5:44). From the cross he said, “Father forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing” (Luke 23:34). I believe that prayer also included Judas Iscariot.

Conclusion: “Love one another.” All of this now brings us back to our text, “Love one another.” What does Jesus mean by love? To love one another as Jesus loves is to live a life shaped by a love that knows no limits. It's a willful decision, a commitment to love despite our feelings or the way we are treated by other people. And it's hard work!

Toward the end of the sermon one might simply pose the question: What work of love is there for you to do in your life? Perhaps you might make some suggestive statements like the following to help people think about their relationships. If in our relationships, there are hurts and wounds that are not yet healed, Jesus calls us to seek out one another and find healing. If there are unresolved conflicts, Jesus calls us to work through them and restore the relationships. If we find it difficult to interact or work with a co-worker, Jesus calls us to take the initiative to do whatever is necessary to improve the relationship. If we hold grudges or resentment against others, Jesus calls us to confess them, accept each other, and let go of the past.

One must be clear here, lest people misunderstand. This kind of love is not about “liking” each other or becoming each other's best friend. This is about respecting each other and working for each other's well-being despite our feelings and emotions. It's about living and working together in unity for a purpose that transcends us all—for the greater good of the kingdom of God and our world. This kind of love can transform a workplace, heal a family, restore a marriage, unify a church, bring peace to a neighborhood, and even bring peace among religious and ethnic groups or nations.

A note. When Jesus says “love one another” in this context in John's Gospel, he is speaking about loving one another in the community of Jesus' disciples. In the broader context of all the Gospels, however, it is clear that Jesus calls us to love all with whom we come in contact. The Great Commandment (Matthew 22:34-40; Mark 12:28-34; Luke 10:27-28) and Jesus' love of people beyond the disciple community are clear indications that our love for others is to extend beyond the church to all people.

One might close the sermon with words like this: I don't know what work of love there is for you and me to do. But I know there is someone who needs our love. Not just someone who is easy to love. Someone who is hard to love also needs our love. And that's the tricky part of love—the most difficult part. But by the grace of God, we don't have to do this on our own. In fact, we can't do this by ourselves. We need God's grace and strength to love others. The One who calls us to love one another is also the One who will enable us to do it.

Connection to Daily Life and Work: To love others as Jesus loves us is a committed decision to love despite our feelings or the way other people treat us. It means loving those around us who are easy to love and also those who are difficult to love. This kind of love can heal a family, restore a marriage, transform a workplace, or bring peace in communities.