



## SUNDAY SERMON

# Love Story

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*The Gospel according to John, chapter 15, verses 9 to 17.*

*As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love. If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commandments and abide in his love. I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete. "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. You are my friends if you do what I command you. I do not call you servants any longer, because the servant does not know what the master is doing; but I have called you friends, because I have made known to you everything that I have heard from my Father. You did not choose me but I chose you. And I appointed you to go and bear fruit, fruit that will last, so that the Father will give you whatever you ask him in my name. I am giving you these commands so that you may love one another.*

Lent is a love story.

We don't often think of Lent as a love story – we think of it as a time of self-examination and penitence, self-denial and spiritual focus. It is all of that—and, I believe it is a love story in the great tradition of movie love stories.

Boy meets girl – or boy meets boy, or gender-fluid “other.” A spark flares, a connection is made. Maybe they fall in love right away, maybe they begin a dance of getting acquainted, maybe one is in another relationship. But something draws them to each other. Is that where the movie ends? Never! For it to be a good love story, there have to be obstacles, conflict, usually some kind of rift or misunderstanding, a distance, a moving apart.

And is that where it ends? We hope not ... some movies end like that, but it's not very satisfying. In a really good love story, some way is found for coming back together. Obstacles are overcome, conflicts finally aired, misunderstandings cleared up, intimacy is renewed. Love wins, to quote a popular spiritual book of a few years ago.

And most of the time one party has to sacrifice something to lower the barrier for the other... pride, or being right, sometimes even home and family. True love is not easy.

This is the great love story of our faith – the story of each one of us in relationship with the God who made us, and how we drift away or walk away or storm away, and are drawn back through the sacrifice of love. In this love story God does all the sacrificing; Jesus leaves home, lays it all down. We do all the receiving, until we are loved into being able to respond.

We celebrate that sacrifice and triumph of love supremely in Holy Week and Easter—and it is a mystery so big, so vast, we take five weeks to prepare for it. The purpose of Lent is not to focus on our sins or ... even on God's forgiveness ... I would argue that the purpose of Lent is to draw near to God, to be drawn near by the One who made us, loves us, and will not let us go, who wants passionately for us to be close.

*Continued*

### DATE

Ash Wednesday  
Wed., Mar. 1, 2017

### PREACHER

The Rev. Dr. Kate Heichler

### READINGS

Isaiah 58:1-12  
Psalm 103:8-14  
II Corinthians 5:20b-6:10  
John 15:9-17

How close do you feel to God? I know how I feel when I'm having dinner with someone I love and know well and am having a good time with – that 'never want this to end' feeling; or having dinner with someone I love and know well, and feel tension with; or having dinner with someone we don't actually know that well, though one of us might like to. Lent is a long dinner with someone who wants us to know him/her intimately, to allow ourselves to be known.

We are here, my friends, to allow ourselves to draw closer to God, to allow God to draw closer to us. We are here, in Paul's words, to "be reconciled to God." Why do we need to be reconciled to a God who already loves us madly, some might say irrationally? Well, that's where we go back to our earliest stories of creation and love and provision—and what happened to break all that.

On the first Sunday of Lent, our readings speak of temptation and primal rebellion against the goodness of God in the mythic story of the first man, first woman, a snake and an apple. That fateful bite, as our ancient forebears described it, resulted in four fatal breaches in relationship:

- between humans and their Creator – suddenly they hide from God;
- between man and woman – they start blaming each other;
- between humankind and the natural world—animals are killed to make covering for the humans, newly aware of their shame.
- within the human psyche, as shame creates a divided self.

The Good News we share as Christians claims that these four breaches were healed in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. As we experience that healing, we become a people of restored relationship, of reconciled and reconciling love, "ambassadors for Christ, God making his appeal through us," as St. Paul wrote to the church in Corinth. He spelled out the work we need to do in order to be effective peace-bringers:

*"We entreat you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God."*

Repentance and reconciliation can be hard work, as we shine the light of Christ into dark corners in our psyches and our world. But this is healing work, love work, which we do not do alone. We do it with the power of God's love running through us as sap through a vine.

*"As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you;," said Jesus. "Abide in my love."*

Keeping his commandments, living a life of integrity and authenticity and holiness—that is how we abide in his love.

And that love spreads out. In a movie love story, it's all about the two people. In God's love story, the love cannot be contained between two. It spills over to encompass the whole community of love. "Love one another," Jesus commanded, "as I have loved you." The reconciliation we experience becomes shared, as we keep expanding the circle of love. As Paul writes,

*So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!*

As we draw near to the great love of God, as we lay down those things that separate us from that love—whatever that is for you this season, laying down things that distract you from God, taking on things that tune you in—as we allow ourselves to be formed as lovers in that great love, we find energy for bringing healing to the world around us, becoming repairers of the breach, restorers of streets for people to dwell in," in the beautiful words of Isaiah.

We are not embarking on a season of hardship – though all love stories have hard times. We are headed into a season of learning better and better what it means to be loved beyond comprehension. Just listen again,

The Lord will guide you continually, and satisfy your needs in parched places, and make your bones strong; and you shall be like a watered garden, like a spring of water, whose waters never fail.

Friends, now is the acceptable time. Now is the day of salvation. Now we claim this promise. A dating app might send you this message: You have a match!" Let's explore the possibilities, as once again we enter the greatest love story, the oldest of all stories, and yet ever new in us.

Amen.