

Title: "An Invitation To Love"

Text: John 15:9-17; I John 4:7-12

All summer, on the Sunday's on which I have been preaching,  
-we have been looking together at "Invitations from God."

In particular, specific invitations that Jesus gives in the  
Gospels,

- which continue to resound all down the centuries even to  
the likes of us 2000 years later.
- The invitation to repent and be baptized.
- The invitation to "Come and follow me."
- The invitation to rest.
- The invitation to forgive.
- The invitation to admit we might be wrong.
- The invitation to remember.
- And the invitation to pray "Thy Kingdom come, Thy will be  
done."

As we come to the end of the summer, I want to focus on one  
last invitation,

- which is actually the most essential of them all:  
-the invitation to love one another.
- It's an invitation which Jesus gave at the Last Supper,  
as he gathered with his disciples in that upper room on  
the night before he died on the cross.

Listen to what he says to them in John 15:9-17.

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So I am calling this invitation to love "an invitation" from God.

-But it's actually more than an invitation, isn't it?

-It's a command.

He says it multiple times in this passage: This is my  
command, "Love each other."

-So it's not really optional is it?

-It's not really one of those invitations that you can "take it  
or leave it."

William Willimon is a long-time Methodist pastor down in North  
Carolina,

-who for many years was also the Chaplain at Duke University.

He tells the story of a time when he was a relatively young pastor,

-and was leaving the church on a Sunday morning.

-It was after worship was all over and everyone else had gone home.

He was the last to leave the building and was turning off the lights,

-and getting ready to lock the doors behind him on the way out.

It was then that he noticed this forlorn looking man approaching him, with tattered clothes, a small worn bag.

He writes, "I sighed as I watched the man approach.

-It had been a long day.

-I had a meeting to return to that night at the church.

-I was eager to get home.

-I thought, 'Alright, I'll just give him whatever cash I have on me and send us both on our ways.'

'What can I do for you?' I asked the man with some annoyance in my voice.

'I wondered if you might be able to help a fella on the way south,' he said. 'I just need enough for a bus ticket...'

'Yes, yes,' I said. 'I'm in a bit of a hurry. So here is all I have. \$15. That's all I've got.'

The man took the money as I offered it; looked at it, and walked away without a word.

-He headed back up the street.

Then he stopped and turned back to me.

'I guess you think I'm supposed to thank you,' he said in a surprising tone of defiance.

'Well,' I said, 'Now that you mention it a little gratitude wouldn't hurt.'

'Well, I'm not going to thank,' he said. 'You know why? Because you're a Christian, and you don't help me because you want to. You have to help me because HE told you to help me.'

And then he left.

Willimon writes, "I stood there stunned, and angry.

-The nerve of that guy, I thought.

-But later on my drive home it finally hit me: He was right."

"This is my command," Jesus says. "Love each other."

-That guy was right.

-We don't love and take care of each other because we always want to,

-or because we feel a virtuous, loving feeling,

-or because we have the right altruistic attitude.

We love because He told us to. It's more than an invitation.

"If you want to remain in my love," Jesus says, "then you must obey my commands. And this is my command: love one another."

That's it.

-We are to act in loving ways toward one another because Jesus commands us to.

And Jesus gave this command to his disciples at the Last Supper,

-at the meal we are about to reenact in a few minutes.

And he told them this was a New Commandment.

-And that may well have been a surprise to the disciples because loving others was not a new commandment at all.

-It was as old as the 10 Commandments, which had been at the heart of Judaism for centuries.

-As far back as the Exodus, when God had commanded the Israelites to love their neighbors as themselves.

-When Jesus had been asked earlier in his ministry what the greatest commandment of all God's commandments was,

-He said, "The greatest commandment is to love God with all your heart, soul, strength and mind. And the second is like it, love your neighbor as yourself."

So what was new about Jesus command at the last supper?

-Well here in verse 12, Jesus says, "Love each other 'as I have loved you. Greater love has no one than this, that he lay down his life for his friends."

-And the next day Jesus went out and laid down his life for all of us.

Oh. So that is what is new about Jesus' commandment to love.

-Not only are we supposed to love our neighbors as ourselves.

-He is actually inviting and commanding us to love others AS HE HAS LOVED US.

Yikes. That's even worse!

-He actually expects us to lay down our lives for other people.

-even those who are not grateful.

-He is inviting us to love people who are not nice back to us.

-He is inviting us to love even our enemies.

That means dying to ourselves.

-That means giving of our selves.

-That means all kinds of things that I don't even want to think about.

And who can love like that?

-Really, who can love "like Jesus loved?"

-Not me, I can tell you that.

-I like to love people that love me back.

-I really don't like to love people who don't love me back.

And I don't think that any of us, on our own, have the inner strength or resources to love like Jesus loved.

But it's a command!

-How can Jesus command us to do something we can't possibly do?

Well, that's the big dilemma of the whole Bible, isn't it?  
-God is always and forever inviting us and commanding us to do things that in our own strength we cannot do.

And it's not because God is mean and sadistic, and takes pleasure in our failures.  
-It's because His ultimate invitation is for us to trust Him, and to learn to live interdependently with Him.

And behind all of God's commandments, are His promises to be with us,  
-and to will and to work in us and through us if we will trust Him.

So when God commands us to love others as He has loved us,  
-His promise is that He will be the source of that love.

In fact, this is one of those places where the original language that the New Testament was written in has a nuance that is worth mentioning.

In Greek, the tense of the verb that is translated, "as I have loved you,"  
-is a tense that implies an on-going, continuous action.

You could translate it as, "Love one another as I keep on loving you."

In other words, it is Jesus continuous, on-going love for us, that enables us to love each other.  
-It's not my inner resources of love that enable me to obey his command.  
-It is Jesus' resource of love that enable me to obey His command.

We can only love like He loves as His love flows into us and through us.

In fact, this passage we are looking at immediately follows the famous passage where Jesus tells his disciples that "He is the vine and they are the branches.

He says, "If you as a branch remain connected to me, the vine, you will bear much fruit.

-If you get disconnected and broken off the vine, you will dry up and shrivel.

-But remain in me, Jesus says. Stay connected to me, and my life will flow through you and you will bear much fruit."

That's the image.

-And so when Jesus then commands them to love others as He has loved them.

-The promise is, "You will fulfill that command by staying connected to me.

-And my continuous, on-going love for you will continue to flow not only into your life, but through you into the world around you.

So "remain in my love," Jesus says, "and you will obey my command."

-Not because you are trying so hard to live sacrificially, and to die to yourself, and to do all the right things all the time.

-No, you will obey my command because my love will simply start flowing through you.

I've said it before and I'll say it many times again.

-This Christian life is not about trying harder, it's about trusting more.

-So if you find yourself trying, trying, trying harder and harder to be holy, or to be loving, or to be more forgiving, or more patient, or more accepting.

-Well, take a break. Give it up. You can't do it.

But surprisingly, if you give up on yourself, and you lean on Jesus and rest in Him,

-He will bear all of that fruit in you, and through you.

-You will discover yourself becoming more like Him in spite of yourself.

It's the craziest thing.

-Remain in me, he says, and you will bear much fruit.

My friends, the only way we can obey His command to love  
-is to trust that He will supply all we need to obey.

And as we do, others will begin to see Jesus living in us and  
loving through us.

-And they will recognize that we are his disciples.

And it won't matter so much if the people we are loving love us  
back or not.

-It won't matter so much if they are grateful or not.

-What matters is if Jesus is loving us and continually  
pouring His love into us.

He is the source of the love, not them.

He is the motivation for our loving, not them.

He is the one loving through us, not us.

So my friends, as we come to the communion table today,

-as we re-enact the Last Supper at which Jesus gave this  
invitation, this "New Commandment" to love,

-let us invite Him to come and meet us here again,

-and to feed us and fill us with His love.

Let's invite Him to replenish our supply, to refill our reservoir.

For as Jesus' disciple John wrote in our earlier reading today:

"For love comes from God, and everyone who loves has  
been born of God and knows God. For God is love. And  
whoever does not love, does not know God.

And this is love: not that we loved God, but that He first  
loved us, and sent His Son as an atoning sacrifice for sins.

Dear friends, since God so loved us, we also ought to love  
one another. For no one has ever seen God, but if we  
love one another, God lives in us, and His love is made  
complete in us.

Let us pray.