

# BELIEVE

a sermon by

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*Text: "And now I have told you before it takes place, so that when it does take place, you may believe" (John 14:29)*

There are many different thoughts and ideas about the person and work of God. There are some who consider God to be all loving, and little if anything else. While it is true that God is love, it is also true that if we look only upon the affection that we would wish to impose upon God, we reduce the Almighty Maker of Heaven and Earth to nothing more than a source of warm fuzzies.

Warm fuzzies – this is not the essence of God.

When we reduce God to anything less than what God truly is, we too are guilty of that same error. The difficulty for us lies in the fact that it is difficult to understand God. It is difficult for us today, just as it was difficult for the disciples who followed after Jesus.

By all accounts it had been a long and difficult day. Jesus, as he had on most days of his ministry, traveled about the community teaching, preaching and healing all who were sick. The disciples and others who were in the crowds around him often had difficulty understanding, truly grasping and comprehending, the full measure of what Jesus had to say. Particularly difficult for people to understand is the relationship between faith, love and action.

## I.

In today's New Testament text we encountered Jesus on one of the most difficult days recorded in all of history. This is not just any day; this is the day that Jesus is to be betrayed. He has journeyed towards Jerusalem, and now having entered into the city, is aware of what will follow.

All of the Gospel accounts record Jesus and his final days in conversations with his disciples. The Gospel of John goes into extraordinary detail to record the speech in conversations that surrounded the table throughout that evening.

Among the most important statements spoken by Jesus was this, "A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another; even as I have loved you, that you also love one another. By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another." (John 13:34-35)

Within this famous sentence, Jesus is issuing a commandment of love. But here Jesus speaks not just of any love, he speaks specifically of the greatest love, the love that can come only from God.

Throughout the Gospel of John, Jesus is speaking of the love that comes from God, and of the love that his disciples should rightly have for others. In this he speaks only of agape love. This is the love that is so great that it has neither beginning nor end. It is a love that can come only from God. But this agape love is distinguished by more than its source. This love, agape love, is also distinguished by its results.

We find evidence of this fact in the words that Jesus is recorded as having spoken around the table. He speaks of love, faith, and actions. Simon Peter raises the question asking, "Lord, where are you going?" Jesus responds with the answer, "where I am going you cannot follow me now; but you shall follow afterward." (John 14:36). Peter pledges his undying support and fidelity to Jesus in the cause. Jesus foretells of the night of the betrayal, a night that ends upon the rooster crowing in the morning.

Then there is this comfort, "Let not your hearts be troubled; you believe in God, believe also in me. In my father's house are many rooms; if it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? But because I go and prepare a place for you, therefore, you know that I will come again and will take you to myself, so that where I am, there also may you be." Jesus goes on to say, "I am the way, and the truth and the life; no one comes to the father, except by me. If you had known me, you would have known my father also; henceforth you know him and have seen him." (Adapted from John 14:1-7).

In this, Jesus has spoken of the new commandment that we are to love one another just as God has loved each one of us; and, he has instructed his disciples to have faith enough that your hearts not be troubled. This is the same faith that we hear of later in the New Testament, faith described as "the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen." (Hebrews 11:1).

Jesus later goes on to say, "Truly, truly, I say to you, he who believes in me will also do the works that I do; and greater works than these will he do, because I go to the father. If you love me, you will keep my commandments. And I will pray to the father, and he will give you another Counselor, to be with you forever, even the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees him nor knows him; you know him, for he dwells with you, and will be in you." (John 14:12, 15-17).

Throughout his life, and now in his final spoken lesson, Jesus is calling his disciples to bear witness to the love of God, the faith that God gives to us, and the actions that we are privileged to do. Love, faith and action may be understood as the three legs of the stool upon which we are seated. With only two, or perhaps with anyone out of balance, we are necessarily unsettled and uncomfortable.

The disciples simply could not understand the relationship between love, faith and action.

## II.

Sometimes it's fun to joke about people and their ability to misunderstand the most obvious message. Comedians Bud Abbott and Lou Costello earned their fortunes with jokes about misunderstandings. They once quipped about a mutual friend who was not very bright. The story is told that he went into the post office where he saw a sign that read, "Wanted: Murderer." The friend walked up to the counter and asked if he could apply for the job.

Not all errors and misunderstandings are amusing. The disciples of Jesus simply could not understand what he was talking about. In the middle of this commandment that we are to love one another, there comes a bizarre and misguided question. "Judas (not Iscariot) said to him, 'Lord, how is it that you will manifest yourself to us, and not to the world?'"

Here Jesus is in the middle of the lesson on how it is through his disciples that he will be revealed to the world; and, as if he is not paying even a tiny little bit of attention, Judas seeks to claim and cling to Jesus as his very own.

In his answer, Jesus continues to reiterate this extraordinarily important lesson. "If a man loves me, he will keep my word, and my Father will love him, and we will come to him and make our home with him. He who does not love me does not keep my words; and the word which you hear is not mine but the Father's who sent me." (John 22:23-24).

In his answer, Jesus is pointing to a future moment of wisdom, a time when his disciples will understand.

"These things I have spoken to you, while I am still with you. Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you; not as the world gives do I give to you. Let not your hearts be troubled, neither let them be afraid. You heard me say to you, 'I go away, and I will come to you.' If you loved me, you would have rejoiced, because I go to the Father; for the Father is greater than I. And now I have told you before it takes place, so that when it does take place, you may believe." (John 22:25, 27-29).

Jesus speaks continually of love, faith and action. But at that time, his disciples were unable to hear and understand his words. So Jesus gave to them a unique gift, the knowledge that one day they would understand. In doing this, Jesus is speaking through the disciples, through those who were seated at the table around him, and speaking here and now to you and to me.

Like the disciples that were seated around the table that night, we too misunderstand the relationship between love, faith and action.

### III.

People often do not understand the very concept of love. We are confused by passion, infatuation and excitement. But these are not the same as love, intimacy and commitment.

Attempting to make this distinction, famous psychologist Robert Sternberg said, "Passion is the quickest to develop, and the quickest to fade. Intimacy develops more slowly, and commitment more gradually still." (NY Times 10 Sep 85).

He's right about that. In the excitement of passion, we are misguided. Sadly, we allow ourselves to be misguided. We crave the adrenaline rush. We are thrilled by the flash of fireworks. We are too impatient, too badly misguided, to wait patiently or to work diligently as is required by love.

Theologian Paul Tillich is remembered as having said, "The first duty of love is to listen." (Recalled on his death 22 Oct 65).

This truth is found in the words spoken by Jesus. By pointing to a future time of understanding, it is as if Jesus is saying to his disciples, "Listen now -- understand later."

"The first duty of love is to listen." Woven within this statement is the relationship between love and faith.

In the New Testament book of Hebrews, we learn that "Faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen." (Hebrews 11:1). By its very nature, faith necessarily requires that we will at times wait for understanding to come. It is after all the conviction of things not seen.

Love, agape love, that comes only from God shapes all of our actions and makes faith possible. This begs the questions: Whom do you love; and, how is this love reflected in your life and work?

Hear that question again. Whom do you love; and, how is this love reflected in your life and work?

Playwright Tennessee Williams is known to have said, "The strongest influences in my life and my work are always whomever I love. Whomever I love and am with most of the time are whomever I *remember* most vividly..." (NY Times 18 Mar 65)

These words from Tennessee Williams, spoken more than 40 years ago, say something of that interwoven relationship between love and faith and actions. Assume for just a moment that he's correct, that the strongest influences in your life and work will be whomever you love.

The question is more than one of identifying the source or recipient of your love. Your love will be reflected in your life and in your work. So take just a moment and reflect on your life and work. It will not be "all good" and neither will it be "all bad."

We certainly do live in a world that is broken by sin -- shattered by even our own wrongdoing. But, we have faith in the God who is love personified, and also the source of love in this world.

The evidence of God's love is all around us; if only we are willing to open our eyes and to cast our gaze upon it.

Next week, as a nation, we will acknowledge tremendous gifts of love that have been given through our preceding generations. Memorial Day weekend is a bittersweet occasion. We celebrate our freedoms, and those who have purchased them on our behalf. There are remembrances of those who have died in times of conflict. We do well also to remember those who, at this hour, stand in harm's way. We remember that people in uniform, by their actions, demonstrate their love and their faith.

Next Sunday morning, as a congregation, we will commission our Nicaragua medical mission team. We will acknowledge a diverse group of individuals and their wide range of talents. With our prayers, we shall set them apart for a defined term of service. With God's blessing, we will send them to Nicaragua to do the work that awaits them. In this, we acknowledge those individuals who are a part of our medical mission team. In this, we remember all missionaries, all people who have been sent by God. By their actions, they demonstrate their love and their faith.

Next Sunday morning, as the body of Christ, we will celebrate the Day of Pentecost. This is the anniversary of the date that God's Holy Spirit moved and acted in this world, setting apart women and men from every age, representing every language and all nationalities, to be the church, the body of Christ in this world. In this we will acknowledge our sisters and brothers the world over, who are a part of God's church. In this, we will acknowledge all Christians, all people who have been set apart by God. By our actions, we are to demonstrate our faith and our love.

Memorial Day, the commissioning of a mission team, the celebration of Pentecost -- each of these special events bears witness that our faith, our love and our actions are inseparable.

There is an old saying, a poem, "I sought my soul but my soul I could not see. I sought my God but my God eluded me. I sought my brother—and I found all three." (Anonymous; Quoted by London Church News Service May 86)

In seeking out our brother, we truly will find all three -- our soul, our God and our brother.

There are times when we simply will not be able to understand or comprehend our God or God's will. We will be confronted and confounded by people who have what sounds to be a legitimate complaint against the living God. We may even agree with the complaint.

We will not understand our God. But our lack of understanding never absolves us of the responsibility to be faithful to our God. As Jesus said to his disciples, so I, this day, say to you, "a new commandment I give to you, that you love one another; even as Jesus has loved you, that you also love one another. By this all people will know that you are disciples of Jesus, because you have love for one another." (Adapted from John 13: 34-35).

There will be days when you will be unable to make sense of this command. There certainly will be times when you will be unable to obey this command. In your doubt, in your sincere and heartfelt uncertainty, have faith that the time of understanding will follow. Jesus said, "And now I have told you before it takes place, so that when it does take place, you may believe." (John 15:29).