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Love as Jesus Loves:
2014 Commencement
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INTRODUCTION

Beloved, let us love one another, for love is of God, and everyone that loves is born of God and knows God. He that loves not knows not God, for God is love (1 John 4:7).

My little children let us love not in word or in tongue, but in deed and in truth (1 John 3:18).

There are three words every human being needs to hear: “I love you”. The truth is you cannot be whole, you cannot be fulfilled as a human being, you cannot be authentic, unless you receive and return love. It has been proven that when a child is born if you give that child everything without touch and embrace, that child will wither and die. To be human is to love and be loved. To love is to be willing to take a risk with someone, other than yourself.

Love is a Feeling of Being Accepted

So how may we think about love? How may we talk about love? It has often been suggested that love is a feeling and there is much truth to that claim. Of course some people will say that the problem with love as a feeling, is today you feel loved, and tomorrow you don't and it is too precarious to associate love with a feeling. For example, today you graduates are excited about your love for Christ and Christ's love for you, a love made real through family, friends and great professors; and today love takes the form of ecstasy, because the circumstances are ideal. Today you graduates are

sustained and supported by family, congregants, friends and school. The community's love for you is palpable. We hold your hands, we hug you, we embrace you - we are here for you. But the time will come when you will stand alone. The time will come when we will not agree with you, sometimes we will be your critics. Today, it is all smiles and congratulations. But the time will come when you will not always receive our approbation, the time will come when the laughter will cease and you will bump up against fierce disagreements from congregants, your ecclesial denomination, family and friends.

The time will come when some of us here will seem to deny and disappoint you, the time will come when those you love and trust, those from whom you received love and to whom you returned love, will be quiet when you expected them to speak in your behalf. In those times you will discover the limits of love as feeling. Today, on graduation day love is a feeling, a feeling of being accepted; a feeling of having come through the fires of academic rigor and made it to the other side, a feeling that today you do not have to prove yourself to your professors. It's a good feeling, a feeling of acceptance by peers and elders, and today we say to you, "accept your acceptance."

It is very true that quite often people in your churches will not remember what you said but long after your sermon or lecture has been forgotten they will remember how you made them feel. I recall when I started out as a young pastor some 50 years ago. As I began ministry I at a cross roads unsure which way to go. I went to see a pastor here in Kingston, Rev. Leo Rhynie. When I arrived at the parsonage I was greeted by his wife Mrs. Rhynie who explained that he would be with me shortly. After about ten minutes he joined me in conversation about my anxieties. I do not remember what he said,

but I remember how he made me feel. I felt welcomed, I was encouraged, I felt loved, special, when I left him that day I was ready to go on my journey into ministry. Today we accept you in the academic guild as fellow pilgrims who have made it through the long night of academic discipline and I can hear the Holy Spirit whisper in your ears, “You are accepted, accept your acceptance.”

I begin then by saying that love is a feeling of being accepted and this feeling of acceptance should happen in the church. The church must become that “beloved community” in which all who enter through her doors, all who enter into community feel accepted. In that sense the church is not only community but the space- the sacred space, in which the name of Christ is honored and all who enter experience love as acceptance.

This is what St. Paul expresses when in 2 Cor. 5:17 he says, “If anyone is in Christ [*en Christō*], she is new...” To be *en Christō*, is to be in community; it is to be in community in which the love of Christ is palpable. To be in Christ is to belong to a community in which persons are not judged by their degrees, as important as those are; it is to belong to a community in which persons are not judged by their social standing or their religious preferences, to be in Christ is to belong to a community in which the grace of Christ, the love of Christ overarches all our ways. Persons on the outside who meet us and come in touch with us cannot help exclaiming, see how they love each other; see how they accept each other.

Love is Commitment and Responsibility

But love is more than a feeling, it is a commitment, to the community or the one who is loved. Love is a force that engenders a feeling of commitment and responsibility to each other. If someone tells you he loves Jesus but not the church he is not speaking the

truth. You cannot say Yes to Jesus and No to the church. This is indeed a part of the redemptive mystery of the church that as frail and human as the church is, its identity is intertwined with the identity of Jesus.

Commitment is not merely nodding to an ideal or viewing the Christian life as an ideal, it is participation in the life of the community. Love is sharing in the life of the one who is loved. Commitment is love being responsible. Commitment is a willingness to go the extra mile, it is learning to love those who are opposed to us and who will even seek our harm. Love going the extra mile reminds us that often God spreads a table before us in the presence of our enemies. Love as commitment reminds us of our Lord at the last; in the face of evil, when the persons closest to him purposed in their hearts to deny, betray and desert him, Jesus ties a towel around his waist and washes their feet. Jesus teaches us that even when the forces of evil are arrayed against us, love serves. Jesus seems to say, “never bring yourself so low as to hate another person.” Every now and then you will need to tie that towel around your waist and wash the feet of those whose love for Christ and the church seems to waiver.

I had the pleasure some years ago of team teaching a class at Emory University with Coretta Scott-King the wife of the slain civil rights leader, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. It was in the context of that class I invited Martin Luther King, Sr. the father of Dr. King to come and share with us as a class what it was like to be the father of Dr. King during the eventful years when the civil rights movement was at its peak. Rev. King Sr. pointed out to us that during those years it was not unusual for him to receive about 20 telephone calls each day threatening the life of his son. To paraphrase Daddy King, as we called him, referring to his son he said, “the boy was on a collision

course with death, there were too many people who wanted him dead, there was not a question if he would be assassinated, it was a question of when". When he received word on the fateful night of April 4, 1968 that his son, the Apostle of love was murdered, it was in many ways a relief.

But what he was not prepared for was the last Sunday in June 1974 as he stood in the pulpit of his church Ebenezer Baptist Church in Atlanta, a man sitting on a front pew aimed what seemed like a camera at his wife at the organ who had just played the "Lord's Prayer" and killed her. "My wife he said had not spoken an unkind word to anyone, she was doing the Lord's work as organist and choir director." Daddy King said he came perilously close to hating all people, but he said, "I could not bring myself so low as to hate another human being." In the face of unprecedented evil he like his Lord tied a towel around his waist and taught us that love forgives. Love serves even when it is ridiculed. Love forgives even when it is crucified. "Father, forgive them they know not what they do," said Jesus as his enemies did their worst to him.

Agape in the Apostle John's Church

The claim that God's love is unconditional would not have posed a problem to the members of John's Church. Everybody in that church said, God was not the problem. There would be no debate in that church if I said the three words every human being needs to hear is God loves you. Members in that church said they knew God and had a special relationship with God. The problem was although many of these members said they accepted God's unqualified love and had a special knowledge of God they were not translating this love into deeds of kindness and forgiveness for each other. They said they loved God but had no love for each other. The dilemma was they said they loved God and God loved them but this love did not

translate into serving each other; this love did not provide a motivation for social change, this love did not spell solidarity with others.

The Apostle John said that they loved in word and in tongue but not in deed and in truth. Talk about love in word and tongue but not in deed and in truth reminds me of the woman who died and went to heaven. In heaven she met ST. Peter at heaven's gate. Peter was glad to see her and said to her, for you to get into heaven there is a word you will have to spell. "What is the word," she asked; "Love" says Peter. "Heaven is about Love." She spells Love and Saint Peter asks her to work at the gate while he runs an errand. While at the gate her estranged husband arrives. "Well" she said to him, "I did not expect to see you so soon; What happened?" "Well" he said, "I was in a motor vehicle accident and here I am. I know I did not treat you right on earth." "Do not worry about that" she said, "but in order for you to get in through this gate there is a word you have to spell" "What is the word?" he asked. "Czechoslovakia" she said. "To get in you have to spell *Czechoslovakia!*"

Facing Our World

Let me say to the graduates, we your elders owe you an apology because you are going to a world in which there is unprecedented lovelessness. You are going into a world which is much worse than the world our elders gave us. We are passing on to you a world in which there is a culture of violence. A culture of disrespect especially to our women and our young girls.

We also owe you an apology concerning the church we hand over to you. There is too much lovelessness in the church, we fight and quarrel and hurt each other just like the world does. The idols the world worships are often the ones we worship in the church;

materiality, prestige, power and greed. So often people come to church to receive love and instead they leave disappointed.

The analogy that comes to mind as I think of the situation in the church is that of two men in the ring boxing and at the end of each round they go to their corners for encouragement, love and support in order to deal with another round. The church is like that corner that members come to on Sundays for love and encouragement after being worn out from fighting evil all week, sometimes at home, often at work and in the culture at large. And what happens when they come to church; many times there is no support, no encouragement, no love, the people in their corner turn on them. There is no love in deed and in truth. I say to you graduates, "it must not be so among you."

My little children let us love in, deed and in truth. Love as Jesus Loves. Jesus appears in the gospels as a man who loves others. He has nothing but love, no titles like doctor, no tricks, no privileges. The only asset he comes into the world with is love, he has nothing but love to win our hearts.

Today the Apostle John instructs us. If you say you love God whom you have not seen but have no love for God's children you are not speaking the truth. For many persons their love is like a big bush fire that burned and blazed brightly for a while but that was some time ago.

Leaders in the church have to stand in for Christ. Because they stand in for Christ they often forget to point beyond themselves to Christ. You may recall in the Gospel of John chapter 1 John the Baptist is walking along with a number of his disciples and seeing Jesus in the distance he points to Jesus, "Behold the lamb of God". The Baptist says to his disciples you have been looking to me as your teacher but

now I want you to look past me, fix your gaze on Jesus. He is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.

The temptation is for the people's gaze to stop with you, as you stand in for Jesus. It is easy to get carried away and believe that you are the source of their love. It does not matter how much you love the people or how extraordinary your love is, the truth says John is that your love is not the answer, your love is not the source. It is not love in your heart that will make the difference; because what is your little love, today you love and tomorrow you are unsure if you still love. It is God in your heart that provides a source for your ministries of love and mercy. It is God in your heart that makes the difference.

The Apostle John throws us a paradox, he says God is love, but love is not God. The relationship between our love and God is like the relationship between the moon and the sun. The moon has no light of its own, the moon is a reflection of the light of the sun. Our love is made possible because of the divine light within us. God is the source, it is God in your life that is the source of love. I am so glad I am not the source of love because every now and then when I feel like I am running out of Love I know that I must appeal to the source.

Many of us know we are running out of love. I am reminded of a friend whose gas gage is always on E, Always running out. Some leaders in the church are in that situation, some teachers are in that situation, some ministers of government are in that situation, they are burnt out, we remember when their love for people burned brightly like a big bon fire but now the flame flickers in the wind.

You graduates need to start right. Let me say love is the key, the universe responds to love. The challenge is to love as Jesus loves. In

Jesus we meet a love that holds nothing back. In Jesus God made a sacrifice beyond which no sacrifice can go. A problem with Jamaica today is too many persons are holding back. Too many pastors are holding back, too many public servants are holding back. Folks are holding back because somehow they feel that if they give all they will run out of love. But if God is your source, if God is in your heart, if your love is responsive love, love in response to the one who first loved you, your cup will overflow, because the source is eternal. You can give a 100 percent. Do not go through life cruising at 50.

God in Your Heart is the Source of Love and Joy

I like to remember the story of Jesus at the wedding feast in Cana of Galilee. It was his first wedding and his mother was there. Mary noticed that they had run out of wine and there was embarrassment and confusion. Someone had not planned carefully; someone had not done the home work; but is it not true that even when you have done all the homework and done all the planning, things happen. Mary the mother of Jesus told the servants, do whatever Jesus tells you to do. Jesus seeing the water pots were empty gives the order, fill the water pots.

Today as you begin your ministry, as you begin your journey, Christ gives the order, fill the water pots. The Holy Spirit is ready to pour God's love in your hearts. With the song writer each of us can say: "Like the woman at the well I was seeking for things that could not satisfy and then I heard my savior speaking, Draw from my well that never runs dry; Fill my cup Lord, I lift it up Lord, Come and quench this thirsting of my soul. Bread of heaven feed me till I want no more – Fill my cup, fill it up and make me whole. In the name of our creator, our redeemer and our sustainer." Amen, Amen, Amen!