

Sermon – March 20, 2022  
“The Relationships of Jesus”  
The Rev. John C. Wright

Text: Luke 13:1-9

*Pray with me: Father, let the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, my rock and my redeemer. Come, Holy Spirit, come, visit, fill, and anoint the sharing of these words. Make them a blessing for your people that leads to life eternal and fruitful labor as we tarry here on this mission field. Lord, come and astonish us with your word this day.*

*Amen*

Good morning! Welcome to spring! Today is the first day of spring and the equinox. That means that the next full moon marks the arrival of Easter. So, get out in our yards, enjoy the blooms, and let nature declare the resurrection of our Lord. I hope those who are reading the “Jesus Shaped Life” book are enjoying Steve Cordell’s insights about living a life as a Christian. This morning’s sermon will leverage some of what he has written on the relationships of Jesus. Let’s jump into this aspect of a Jesus-shaped life.

Have we ever noticed that people from the same family often share characteristics? Now there are differences in family members, but families have this amazing tendency to share characteristics. When Kay and I visited Jessica at Virginia Tech with her sisters in tow, all of her friends knew her family was present if they saw us. They didn’t have to ask if Jessica’s parents were in town. They could tell by seeing similarities between us and Jessica. When I was in high school, family similarity was a real concern for me because my mother’s brothers were all bald by the end of high school. It was a family characteristic that I did not want to share. All of our daughters’ careers are in technical fields, engineering or computer science, another characteristic our family shares. And all of our daughters also share my family’s music ability, a characteristic that for the most part skipped over their dad. Shared characteristics are not unique to my family. They are seen in other families as well. Some will remember J.J. Watt, an all-pro football player. His younger brothers, T.J. and Derek, also play in the NFL. They share this family characteristic and its presence is not a coincidence.

When we believe in Jesus, we seek to grow into his image, taking on some of Jesus’ traits and characteristics. As Christ followers we should have the same traits as Jesus. People should be able to pick us out in a crowd like our daughter’s friends did with us by the shared characteristics or traits we have with Jesus. What is the primary trait of Jesus we should have? Love. The love of Jesus rises to the top of the list over all other traits, and as we grow into his image, we should have the love of Jesus as

our number one trait. Turn to Ephesians 5:1-2. Paul encourages us to “Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children, and live in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.” If we were to search for the central value in God’s kingdom, this is what we would find, love. Remember, when Jesus is asked about the greatest command, what he responds with is a modification of the Shema, a text we recently used as a call to worship, and the text used in synagogues each sabbath to call people to worship. Turn with me now to Mark 12:28-31. “One of the scribes came near and heard them disputing with one another, and seeing that he answered them well, he asked him, ‘Which commandment is the first of all?’ Jesus answered, ‘The first is, “Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one; you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength.” The second is this, “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” There is no other commandment greater than these.’ ” The common word in Jesus’ response is love. To grow into Jesus’ image, we need to grow in love.

When I say we need to grow in love, what comes to our minds? How do we define love? My favorite candy bar is a Zero bar. Anyone ever had one? I once had to give a talk about love during a weekend outreach event in a juvenile center and during the practice with the team of people preparing to go into that facility, I gave them all a Zero bar to share my love of those delicious candy bars with others. My desire for that candy bar though is not love in the same sense that Jesus demonstrates love. Some of us, when we hear the word love, may think about romance or warm feelings toward another person. That also is not how Jesus demonstrates love. What we are looking for is the biblical definition of love. Love is not a feeling as our culture defines it. Biblically, love is acting in the best interest of someone else. Let’s look in our Bibles and see if we can get a better idea of the biblical concept of love. In Ephesians 5:2, Paul tells us we are to live in love, “just as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us . . .” Jesus acted in our best interest when he died on the cross for our sins. He saw our need and met it. This is the biblical idea of love. It is acting as Jesus did, and it is a radically different concept of love than how our culture today understands love.

Think of people who live selfish lives. They refuse to help others. We will never say or hear it said of them that they are just like Jesus. Then think of examples of people who are not selfish. Dan Boatright is one that comes to my mind. Dan was a medical doctor who gave up a successful practice as a pain management doctor in Texas to go to Costa Rica and Nicaragua to care for people in places such as the slums in Costa Rica for Nicaraguan refugees. Dan would take the limited assets for medical care he had into that place of such great need and would come to an intersection and ask God which way to go to use the limited life sustaining medical supplies he had in his hand that day. Mother Teresa and her work in the slums of Calcutta is another powerful example. Barbara’s father and his medical

mission work in India is another great example. And now each day in the news, we see the love of men and women of Ukraine who put their children on trains out of Ukraine and stay to defend their homeland. All of these people exhibit a different concept of love. Their lives reflect the image of Christ. I am confident that we can all find examples of saints in our lives who have lived out Christ's love in our presence.

Our question should be, "How do we grow in this type of love, the love of Christ?" To do this we need to reflect on Jesus' love for us. Here we should open our Bibles to 1 John 4:19 where we will find, "We love because he first loved us." We need to seek to grow in the love that is given to us by God through Jesus in the power of the Holy Spirit. We cannot give away what we have not received or experienced. It is a little like my gift of Zero bars. I went to the store and bought a box so I could share them with others. How do we begin to encounter this type of love and grow into it? One starting place is to meditate on a God who created the universe and yet knows us, cares about us, provides for us, and sustains us. I like to walk outside on a clear night, look up at the stars, and wonder how a God who created something so magnificent also knows my name and loves me. If we desire to encounter the love of Jesus in our lives, we can begin by asking Jesus in prayer to show us his love for us. This would be a great prayer each day of Lent, asking Jesus to show us his love for us, and then waiting expectantly for an answer to our prayer. For us to love others as Jesus loves us, we need a deepening experience of Jesus' love.

Another key for experiencing Christ's love is to realize we cannot fully experience Christ's love alone. No one who follows Christ follows him alone. It is not possible to act in the best interest of someone else if we are alone. John Wesley had a great deal to say about this idea of solitary religion. As an example, he writes, "Holy solitaires is a phrase no more consistent with the Gospel than holy adulterers. The Gospel of Christ knows no religion but social; no holiness, but social holiness." We need to be in community to act in love as Jesus teaches.

Those who follow Jesus become part of a people group, the body of Christ. This is the capital C church made up of local churches where we connect to other believers like the parts of our bodies are connected. It is in the body of Christ that we who share the same spiritual DNA are able to connect. If we will read our Bibles, we will find that believers are described as "family." And not a family whose characteristic is to argue with each other, but who love each other as Christ loves us. In the New Testament, we will find Christians called "sisters and brothers." Believers are children of God, princesses and princes in God's kingdom. An important distinction to understand is we are all created in the image of God, but only believers in Jesus have been adopted into this family. Have you ever been part of a congregation that addresses each other as brother and sister? This is a recognition of who

they are in Christ and serves to remind each other of this as we meet. This is what happens in a band. As the members grow through the love of Christ shared in those gatherings, they become spiritual brothers and sisters, bound together by the love of Jesus Christ. We do not all think alike, yet we are unified in the love of Jesus. John Wesley wrote of this idea, asking Methodists, “Though we cannot think alike, may we not love alike? May we not be of one heart, though we are not of one opinion? Without all doubt, we may. Herein all the children of God may unite, notwithstanding these smaller differences.” Don’t get focused on the smaller differences; unite in the love of Christ.

Turn in your Bibles to the Gospel of John, chapter 1, verse 12, one of many places where we find biblical support for the idea of adoption by our heavenly Father. “But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God.” If we are children of God, we are part of God’s family and as such we appreciate people of all ages: old, young, and everything in between. Think about our extended family experiences if we were blessed to have them. On warm Sunday afternoons when I was growing up in West Virginia, my family would go to my mother’s parents’ home and spend time with cousins, aunts, uncles, and grandparents. As God’s family, we should seek this same diverse gathering of ages in our congregations. Healthy churches are made up of the generations: parents, children, siblings, grandparents, great grandparents, and so forth. If we give priority to any one age, we lose something very valuable. We need to seek to spend time with our younger and older brothers and sisters. Now looking around at our congregation this morning, we are not an age-diverse group. We tend to be more experienced people. How do we change our situation? First, we spend time with those in the community who are not in our age group. Look for those opportunities, pray for them, and follow the guidance of the Holy Spirit into such relationships. And how do we transform this congregation into an age-diverse family of God? Good question. Next, we all should pray, asking Jesus to bring about that transformation. Pray and ask Jesus to transform us into a church connected to believers and non-believers of all ages, and ask him to ready us for their arrival. Ask Jesus to transform us into those who are ready, willing, and prepared to so order our lives that new people might be discipled and grow into the image of Jesus. And as we pray for that gift, we need to open our hearts to the guidance of the Holy Spirit and go and meet those who are younger where they gather and invite them into the love of Jesus through loving relationships.

Another aspect of God’s family is that it is worldwide. There are approximately 2.3 billion Christ followers in the world today. God’s family is diverse and when we come together united in Christ in a manner that begins to reflect that reality, God’s Spirit and power are released. Many know that one of my favorite verses in the Bible is Revelation 7:9. Turn there in your Bibles this morning and, if you like, mark this verse as one of your pastor’s favorite verses. Listen to these words, “After

this I looked, and there before me was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language, standing before the throne and before the Lamb. They were wearing white robes and were holding palm branches in their hands.” This is the same vision our congregations should be growing into as best we can, a place of all people. We should pray that Jesus will lead more of the body of Christ to worship here and will transform us to be those who are open to the challenges of being a church family resembling this heavenly vision. We should also ask Jesus to transform us into a people who intentionally welcomes everyone. We are all part of God’s family. We are all related in Jesus Christ.

As we pray for transformation, we need to grow in our biblical knowledge of loving each other as Christ loved us. Ephesians chapter 4 provides many insights on how we are to live in love with one another. Let’s start with verse 25. “So then, putting away falsehood, let all of us speak the truth to our neighbors, for we are members of one another.” We need to work to recall that we are related, we are in the same family, and speak the truth in love to each other.

Next, let’s look at verses 26-27, “Be angry but do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger, and do not make room for the devil.” As members of the same family, we are to restrain our anger towards one another. Anger becomes sin when it guides us to not love each other and to not act in another’s best interest, but to hurt and mistreat them. Instead of holding onto our anger and letting it grow into bitterness, we are to promptly deal with our anger. To do so, we need to learn how to talk in a constructive manner about what is occurring in our relationships that leads to our anger. We start in prayer, asking God to help us speak to the source of our anger. Jesus did get angry, but did not sin. What would occur if God did not restrain his anger towards us? That is the wrath of God and none of us could stand before it. Praise God that His anger is restrained and instead love overflows for us. We are to have this same response, not to act in anger, but to let love, the love of Jesus, flow into us and out of us to others.

And finally, let’s look this morning at verse 32. “And be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ has forgiven you.” We are to freely forgive others as God has forgiven us. When we live with each other in any kind of community, like a congregation, we will hurt and be hurt by others. Living with other imperfect people means we will be hurt by others. We worship in a body whose members are undergoing transformation into the image of Christ, not a body that is already transformed. Look around this morning. Heaven has not yet come to earth. The kingdom of God is not fully present. The most loving act of all is forgiving someone who has hurt us, because it is completely other-centered. When we forgive, we choose not to get even with people who hurt us. And forgiving others is very much like Jesus. As I spent time in the ER last week, I had time to think

about how our congregation should be a place where we come for healing. When we get hurt by our brother or sister in Christ, we should come and ask for help and a fresh infusion of Jesus' love that leads us to forgive. We should think of ourselves as being rolled into church on Sunday morning all but lost in our sin, only to find an infusion of Jesus' love that flows into us and fills us with new hope, forgiveness, and wholeness.

Forgiving others is difficult, very difficult, especially when it has cost us those whom we love in life. The people of Ukraine are losing loved ones at this moment. They may be more focused on stopping the unjust actions among them, but a day will come when they will need to forgive. They will need Jesus' example from the cross to be able to forgive, as we all do each day. Realizing that Jesus has forgiven us much more than we need to forgive others helps us to reach deep within and find the overflowing love of Christ and forgive. Look at our own relationships in our lives that are broken. Is there someone we don't ever want to see again, someone whose memory brings pain, hurt, and anger? Ask the Holy Spirit to fill us with power to set aside those memories and leave the scale unbalanced. We are more like Jesus when we forgive another person who has hurt us than any other time. Look for those places where we are seeking to find a way to balance the scales in our lives and leave them as they are, choosing to forgive as we are forgiven.

For those who would seek to follow Christ, love is not something we add on when we think of it. It is the point of following Jesus. In 1 Corinthians 13, verses 1-3 we find these words that speak to the love of Christ, "If I speak in the tongues of mortals and of angels, but do not have love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing. If I give away all my possessions, and if I hand over my body so that I may boast, but do not have love, I gain nothing." As we are shaped into the image of Jesus, we should expect to look back at our lives and see how the love of Christ has grown in our lives. When we look forward, we should look to Christ with a deep hunger in our souls for more love to give to others and less concern about ourselves. I find within myself a growing desire to love in a manner that reflects the family of Jesus, to be seen in a group of people as one who has the characteristics of Jesus. How about you?

*Pray with me: Holy Spirit, come, as we have been forgiven, teach and empower us to forgive. Holy Spirit, transform us into children of God with the characteristics of Jesus. Infuse the love of Christ into our hearts that we may love others as we are loved. We pray in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.*