

All You Need is Love?

John 15.9-17

One of my favourite preachers is Archbishop Desmond Tutu. His daughter Mpho Tutu tells of growing up in the Anglican Church of South Africa when her father was a priest. She sat in Church, with her mother and three siblings and would listen intently as their father began to preach. At approximately five minutes into the sermon they would discreetly hold up their fingers, numbering between one and seven. Their mother, Leah, would then show them her number. One Sunday, over lunch following Worship, Mpho's father Desmond asked what they were discussing and why these numbers were important. "Daddy", she said, "We only know of seven sermons you preach, so that is what we are guessing." "No, my love" Desmond replied, "I only preach one sermon, which is on love...the other's are only variations on this". (from Rabble Rouser for Peace: The Authorized Biography of Desmond Tutu, by John Allen)

I have, through my time as a preacher, adopted the same mantra. It's taken about ten years to get here, but it would be safe to say that I preach on love, almost exclusively. And this year, the apostle John is making it quite easy for me to do so. In previous sermons you have heard me dissect and discuss the four types of love mentioned in the bible: eros, storge, philia and agape. We have discussed how love is a selfless act and how we come to receive God's love as the epitome of unconditional love. Today's gospel synthesizes all Jesus has talked about in love. For one of the only times, Jesus is not speaking in parables, he is speaking plainly. But before we get to Jesus, let's hear from two more modern prophets.

The prophets known as John Lennon and Paul McCartney, wrote *All You Need is Love* in 1967 the Summer of Love. Did you know that the word love is mentioned 102 times in the song? No, I didn't count. The song was written as a contribution to the first live television link for a BBC Global initiative called "Our World", a first of its kind. The lyrics were intentionally simple in order to be better understood by a global, multilingual audience. The music is a fabulous compilation of original music fused together with the French National Anthem, In the Mood, Greensleeves and even some other Beatles' songs.

The lyrics are simple and the tune is catchy.

There's nothing you can do that can't be done
Nothing you can sing that can't be sung
Nothing you can say, but you can learn how to play the game
It's easy

Verse one tells us we are far more capable than we realise. We can do anything we put our minds to, we can sing any song, even if we don't think we have the right voice. If we don't know how to do something we can learn. It's easy?

Nothing you can make that can't be made
No one you can save that can't be saved
Nothing you can do, but you can learn how to be you in time
It's easy

Verse two tells us we can craft anything we can imagine, we can save anyone who wishes to be saved, and one of the most profound lyrics, we can only be ourselves, yet it might take us time to get there. It's easy?

All you need is love
All you need is love
All you need is love, love
Love is all you need

Truly, the anthem of my life.

There's nothing you can know that isn't known
Nothing you can see that isn't shown
There's nowhere you can be that isn't where you're meant to be
It's easy

The final verse tells us that our knowledge is not finite, we can see beyond our wildest imagination, and that where we are is where we are meant to be. Another profound, yet simple lyric.

All you need is love
All you need is love
All you need is love, love
Love is all you need

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The Beatles were writing at a time when the Vietnam war was raging and global support for the war was at an all-time low. 1967 was considered the Summer of Love where long haired, tie dye wearing hippies were pushing against the establishment that told them to be successful they had to get a university or college education, get married, start a family, buy a house and work hard.

Success was measured by the acquisition of stuff, and then bigger and better and newer stuff. And then they'd be successful and therefore happy, right?

Yet, the idea of pushing against the establishment was not a hippy invention. It had, in fact, been talked about for thousands of years before that. From this itinerant Nazarean rabbi and carpenter who was more about feeding the hungry, then following the rules. He was more about caring for those society had discarded: the widows, the orphans, the sick, the elderly, the addicts, the social misfits. He gathered up many of these misfits, including *gasp* a tax collector and taught them that there was a new way.

“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.” (John 15.9-11, NRSV)

Jesus is telling his disciples that he loves as much as he does because he has known God’s love; and they, too, can know God’s love. All they need to do is follow the commandments - and remember ten were too difficult so Jesus narrowed it down to two - Love God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength and love your neighbour as you’d love yourself.” Simple enough, eh? You follow these few simple things and your life will be ah-mazing!

“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”. (John 15.12-15, NRSV)

This passage marks a shift in Jesus when he's calling his followers friends. Remember at Maundy Thursday, after their last supper together, Jesus took a towel, wrapped it around his waist and told his disciples they needed to pay attention? He was showing them that no-one is better than another. In God's eyes we are all equal. All receive the same, unconditional love, whether they have known God all their life, whether they have wavered in and walked away from their faith to return later, or whether they have only just learned about God. That unconditional love is the same. Now, that may not seem fair, but nobody said the gospel, or that life for that matter, was fair.

"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".
(John 15.16-17, NRSV)

Jesus tells his disciples that although they may have chosen to join him, leaving behind their family (James and John literally left their dad in the boat to follow Jesus), as much as they may think they chose Jesus, it was in fact Jesus that chose them. On order from God. Jesus was told, go get a bunch of guys, they don't have to be the brightest or the strongest or the wealthiest or the most popular. Listen to their heart and bring them to me. Together, we'll teach them what to do.

And now Jesus is preparing to leave them once again, this time for a much longer time, and he needs to know that they are ready. He needs to know that when Jesus ascends to God in heaven, the disciples will be able to carry the mantle and unlearn the societal rules, in favour of the moral rules.

Please don't get me wrong, I know that love can be difficult. At times it can feel impossible. I'm talking about the love of God. God's love for us is all-encompassing. It does not come with conditions. Nobody is excluded from God's love. The bank executive, the sex workers, the working poor, the refugees, the immigrants, the Bishops, the lumberjacks, the homeless, the van lifers, the missionaries, the secretaries, the garbage collectors are all loved as much and as unconditionally as you are. As I am.

And here's the thing. Whether we feel we are worthy or not is irrelevant. We simply are worthy because God has decided we are worthy. Remember that the next time you find yourself judging someone. If God can choose to love me, just as I am, God must also love this person I don't like very much. Or this lifestyle I don't understand. Therein lies the sacred mystery.

God loves, simply because I am.

God loves me, simply because I exist.

And to show God how much I appreciate that love, I must love my neighbour. I may not understand them, or like them. There is no commandment, Thou Shalt Like...because I'd be in big trouble for breaking that one. We are commanded to love.

God knows that love isn't easy. It's messy, it's beautiful, it's horrible, it's exciting. Love is all these things and more. And even when our relationships end, even when we feel we have failed ourselves or failed God, we are still loved, just as we were before.

Remember, God loves you more today than yesterday, but not as much as God will love you tomorrow. When you are struggling to love yourself, remember that God loves you. And while it might not seem like much to you; to God, your love is everything.

Sing it with me...All you need is love, all you need is love. All you need is love, love, love is all you need.

Amen.

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