

**Sermon**  
**Community United Methodist Church of Coeur d'Alene**  
**Sunday, November 13, 2022**  
**10am**

Text: 1 John 5:1-6 (NRSVUE)

[prayer]

Today we reflect upon the third General Rule of The United Methodist Church and its legacy here at Community UMC. Wesley defined this rule as “Attend upon the ordinances of God.” Bishop Reuben Job later translated that rule into modern English: “Stay in love with God.”

How do we love God? And when we love God, how do we *stay* in love?

We tend to associate the word ‘love’ with the emotion or feeling of love. But the trouble with thinking of love as just a feeling is that feelings come and go. They are notoriously unreliable. I love God, but I do always *feel* love for God. There have been entire seasons of my life, in fact, where I kept my Christian faith but did not feel much for God at all. If my faith was based entirely on how I feel about God on any given day, then that is a shaky foundation. Which is why the foundation of our faith is not how we *feel* about God. The foundation of our faith is a person and what that person has done for us. The foundation of our faith is the love that God demonstrates *for us* through his Son, Jesus Christ.

“God’s love was revealed among us in this way: God sent his only Son into the world so that we might live through him. In this is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins” (1 John 4:9-10).

This is the basis of grace, that God loved us first. Whether we happen to feel love for God or not, Jesus has already died and risen – an enduring demonstration of God’s love for each one of us. That love embodied by Jesus is the firm foundation of our faith, and nothing else.

Notice that when we speak of God's love, we are not speaking of a feeling. I genuinely believe that God *feels* love for each one of us. This love is so perfect and holy we cannot fully comprehend it on this side of eternity. (And what we do not understand we often fear, reject, and run away from. If you have ever found yourself running away from God, then you know what I mean.) No, when we speak of God's love, we are speaking of an action – the action of God's love demonstrated for us in the life, death, and resurrection of his Son.

Likewise, when we speak of loving God, we are also speaking of an action. And 1 John teaches us that love for God looks like a very specific action: Keeping God's commandments. Or in Wesleyan terms: Attending upon the ordinances of God.

Now, 1 John does not get into the details of what qualifies as God's commandments for Christians. Is it the Ten Commandments given to Moses on Mount Sinai? Is it the 613 mitzvot – Jewish commandments – outlined in the Torah? Is it the household codes in the New Testament epistles? Is it what you learned from your parents or Sunday School teacher? Or is it the personal discernment and revelation we each receive through the gift of the Holy Spirit?

First John does not say because the letter writer is concerned with one thing: Making sure we understand the source of these disparate commandments – commandments that have been shaped by time and culture and circumstance. Jesus had the same concern. He saw that an overemphasis on religious law was making it hard for some people to access God. So when an expert in the law asked him, "Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?" Jesus said,

*"You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.' This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' On these two commandments hang all the Law and the Prophets"* (Matthew 22:37-40).

The first commandment: Love God. The logic is wonderfully circular: We love God by obeying God's commandments, and the first commandment is to love God! Why do we have this commandment? Is it because God needs our love? No. God did not create the world with an expectation of being loved. God can accomplish what God wills to accomplish without our love or participation. Jesus hung on the

cross with the weight of our rejection on his shoulders, and the world's salvation still came to pass.

But we were made by Love for love, and God *chooses* to use our capacity to give and receive love to make disciples and transform the world. The purpose of loving God is not for God's benefit but for ours. When we love God with all our heart, soul, and mind, God becomes the center of our lives. And when God is at the center of our lives, we have the power to overcome the brokenness of this world. That does not mean we will not suffer because of the world's brokenness – Jesus suffered, too – but our suffering never has the final word. I will say it again: It does not have the final word! Jesus overcame the world at his resurrection, and when we believe that Jesus is the Son of God, we are “begotten of God.” We become children of our Parent in Heaven and inheritors of the same resurrection as Jesus. This is how our faith “conquers the world” (1 John 5:4-5): We believe that Jesus has already conquered the world for us.

Now, the second commandment: Love your neighbor as yourself. It is not always easy to know how to love our neighbor. This is sometimes because we do not even know how to love ourselves. But God provides for us in our weakness! If we love God and keep God at the center of our lives, God will teach us how to love our neighbor and ourselves. This is because God *is* Love, and God's love perfects *our* love.

Jesus said, “Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another” (John 13:34). We are able to love our neighbors and ourselves because God first loved us (5:19). And the love of God that abides within us transforms our human expressions of love (1 John 5:12). When I struggle to know how to love my neighbor or myself, I can trust that God's love is at work in me. John Wesley famously declared that we are going on to perfection, and *this* is what he meant: Love is being perfected in and through us.

But for God's love to be made perfect in us, we must be deliberate about cultivating God's love in our lives. Love is a discipline. It takes intentional practice. John Wesley believed that we stay in love with God through two things: Works of piety (the inward disciplines) and works of mercy (the outward disciplines). Works of piety include prayer, studying Scripture, worship, and the sacraments of baptism and communion. Works of mercy include contributing to charity, visiting

the sick and imprisoned, doing justice, bearing each other's burdens, and practicing forgiveness. Together these are called the means of grace. They are the methods by which we express love for God and neighbor, but also *experience* love for God and neighbor. And they move us to grow in love through disciplined action.

These spiritual disciplines are most powerful when they are practiced in community because we experience God most powerfully through other people. Last week I shared all the good works that I have seen this church perform in the four months I have been among you. What undergirds and empowers those works is God's love, cultivated through disciplined spiritual fellowship over many, many years. This is a crucial part of our legacy that we cannot ignore.

When I think of the ways we love each other in this community, I think of how we commit to pray for each other, individually through our weekly prayer email and corporately here in worship. I think of our small group Bible and book studies, where our understanding of God is deepened through the insights of other people. I think of the cookies and coffee and potlucks, where we share small pieces of our lives over a meal. I think of how we call and send cards and visit when someone is sick or grieving. I think of the baptisms and marriages that have been celebrated in this community, and the beloved people whose lives have been brought to faithful completion in Christian burial. I think of the tender way each one of us approaches God's table to receive the bread of life and the cup of salvation in Holy Communion.

These are the disciplines that knit together a community in love. They are part of the fabric of who we are at Community UMC. First John tells us that these disciplines are not meant to be burdensome. They are meant to give us life, to teach us about the love of God through the love we express for one another. I challenge you to think of at least one person in this community who has been a mentor or example of God's love to you through their dedication in piety and mercy. Perhaps they taught you in Sunday School or Bible study. Perhaps they have gotten on their knees for you in prayer. Perhaps they encourage you spiritually with the faithful gift of their friendship. Whatever and however they have been an example to you, they, like each one of us, are disciple-making by how they live their lives in faith. As they commit every day to grow in God's love,

by their witness they are making other disciples around them. Through them we experience God here at Community UMC, and we rejoice in that!

When we give to the church, we are supporting this work of being disciplined in love. Our gifts may support specific discipleship programs, but more importantly they support and continue the influence, connection, and impact of generations of lives that were and are being perfected in love because of the witness of this church. Love is *the* commandment; love is *the* ordinance. It is the plumbline of our ministry here at Community UMC, guiding our mission for over one hundred years. Again, how can we calculate the impact of more than a century of these simple but profound expressions of God's love in and through this church?

Jesus said, "A new command I give you: Love one another" (John 13:34, NIV). First John teaches us that we love God by keeping God's commandment to love each other. Christian love is an endlessly repeating circle. God loves us. God's love empowers us to love each other. And by loving each other, we love God. We love so that God will take up residence in us – as individuals, but also in this community of faith.

Next week we will consecrate together our financial pledges to our ministry together in the coming year. As we discern individually what we can give, I pray that each of our hearts are centered in the love of God. I pray that our love as a faith community will be perfected in and through our fellowship together. May we keep ourselves deeply rooted in the disciplines of our faith so we can continue to grow in love and discipleship.

Amen.