

**Sermon: Essentials   Text: John 15: 9-17   May 17,2020   Rev. Steve Clifton  
Rideau Park United Church Ottawa, ON**

On my first day in my first church, I found some papers that my predecessor, Jim, left on the desk of the ministers study. There was a file with information about church members. A photo directory to help put names to faces. A schedule of meetings. And a handwritten note. All the note said was this: "Welcome Steve. They are good people. Just love them and they will love you back."

Starting out in my new vocation, I had three years of learning from my Master of Divinity course work. Jim's words: "love them and they will love you back" condensed everything into its essential form for me. The work of ministry is about loving people. And I have carried Jim's words like a silent mantra in my work for more than 30 years.

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Karl Barth was a Swiss Protestant theologian, a giant of 20<sup>th</sup> Century theology. He wrote prolifically and his writing culminated in his masterwork "**Church Dogmatics**", a summation of his theological thought. He started writing it in 1932 and continued working on it until 1968, 36 years, by which time it was 6 million words long, 9233 pages, published in twelve volumes.

Towards the end of his life, Barth was asked if he could put all his thinking into a few words. He replied: "Jesus love me this I know, for the Bible tells me so..." Distilling 6 million words down to only 12, Barth reflected that the essence of faith was love.

Jesus is in the upper room on the night of his betrayal. It's the last time he would be with his friends. He has been with them for 3 years. He had shared with them in word, in action, through teaching and by example. John's Gospel says that Jesus did and said more than is recorded in Scripture. And now Jesus leaves his followers with a commandment. It's phrased as an imperative. He really means this, wants us to hear it and live it. "Love one another as I have loved you." In John's Gospel shared today, Jesus boils 3 years of word and action, teaching and miracle down to an essential. "Love one another as I have loved you."

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If you were to share what you think are the essentials of the Christian faith, what might you say? How would you phrase it?

The Franciscan writer Richard Rohr writes of receiving campaign literature from a local candidate running for Congress where he lives in New Mexico. The would-be congressman said that if elected he would defend the essentials of the Christian faith. These essentials, according to the pamphlet received were defending traditional marriage and making abortion illegal. And Rohr, a Franciscan priest, was perplexed. He wondered how these two things had become the essentials of the tradition of Jesus. Jesus spoke about neither of these things and spoke so often of other things. Rohr reflected that the essentials of our faith are surely self-giving love and forgiveness. As Jesus says "this is my commandment. Love one another as I have loved you."

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We can think of the essentials of our faith. In this time of self-isolation maybe we are also learning about the essentials in life. Are we learning about what is most important, what is most valuable to us? What do you think is essential in your life, in our shared life together? Some possibilities...

*Essential* workers? First responders, nurses, psws, custodians, grocery workers, researchers, doctors, delivery people, truck drivers... We have discovered in a new way that there are some people, many not well paid, who are very important in our life right now, people who are essential to our communal life... you might think of others who might be on your list...

Kindness... which is a disposition of love towards others. People are stressed, sometimes on edge. We all appear to be fine but...

So, kindness is especially valuable now. We all need it. It is wonderful when we receive it. We might all extend it to one another. Kindness is essential in our life together at this time.

Our seniors. At a time when we are unable to enter long term care homes, we are reminded of how important the people who live there are to us and of how much we value them. And we are conscious of how we must do better by them in the future.

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In the world of spiritual direction, there is the idea that God, the sacred, might be found both in consolation and desolation, in what is good and in what is difficult, in what we are grateful for and in what we long for... So if we think of what we are missing, of what we grieve, we might see some things that are valuable, essential...

We may miss rites of passage. Weddings, baptisms, birthdays, graduations, new beginnings, celebrations of life...all these things, these milestones of living are missed and in that we realize how important they are to us.

We will be missing community. As a church we miss our friends, we miss gathering, we miss our children and young people and seniors. We miss talking, sharing, singing, hugging, eating together, and working together. We miss community and connection face to face, and it may be sometime before we can be together again as we were just 2 months ago. In its absence we recognize how valuable community is to us, wherever we find it, in the church and beyond it...

In this desert time of pandemic isolation, might we also recognize the value of faith, of the spiritual, the contemplative, of our inner life...?

People are Googling prayer at an unprecedented rate. Church webcasts are drawing viewers in large numbers. People are sometime watching several online services every week.

Poet Frances Dorff has written this for our desert time of social distancing:

*Lightening the Load*

*The first thing we have to do  
is to notice  
that we've loaded down this camel  
with so much baggage  
we'll never get through the desert alive.  
Something has to go.*

*Then we can begin to dump  
the thousand things  
we've brought along  
until even the camel has to go  
and we're walking barefoot  
on the desert sand.*

*There's no telling what will happen then.  
But I've heard that someone,  
walking in this way,  
has seen a burning bush.*

Brought down to the essentials in this time, might we find the Holy, encounter the sacred, meet God...?

Sometimes when famous people reach the end of their lives, their last words are recorded for posterity. My favorite last words are those of Oscar Wilde who said from his death bed. "Either this wallpaper goes or I do..."

In the gospel we have, not Jesus final words, but the last words he would say to his followers and friends when they were all together. And those words include an imperative: "Love one another as I have loved you" May we live love, following the in the way of Jesus. May we know the love of Christ for each of us where we are and may we grow in love for one another even in this difficult time.

Amen