

Just the Way to Live and Die, a sermon in response to Psalm 98 and John 15:9-17 by Rev. Scot McCachren for Hilltop Church, Mendham NJ, May 5, 2024 (B Easter 6).

Maybe some of you are familiar with the John Denver song called “Matthew.” It’s sung from the perspective of a young man whose *Uncle* Matthew had lived with his family as he was growing up, after Matthew’s *own* family – and life – had fallen apart. But somehow, despite all of Matthew’s hardships, the lyrics recall a deeply content man – sure in his faith... A man abiding in the love of God, which brought joy into his heart and his life. Let’s listen together to some of “Matthew”... **[MUSIC PLAYS HERE]** ... Joy was just the thing that he was raised on, Love ... is *just the way... to live and die.*” +++ ...

You know, if we had to think of one consistent theme in our Holy Scriptures, a theme we hear read about week in and week out – *one pervading idea* – I think we’d all agree that the answer to that would be “Love.” ... “God is Love.” ... “Jesus Loves Me.” ... “For God so loved the world...” +++ And, if there *had* been any question..., Jesus drives the message home today in our reading from John. Two chapters earlier – at the Last Supper – Jesus gave his disciples a New Commandment which provides the underpinnings of *everything* they will do after he is gone: “I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.” +++ And now, two chapters later, he doubles down... “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. ...<< 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.”

“Love one another as I have loved you.” It sounds deceptively simple, doesn’t it? But it might be the most challenging commandment in the whole Bible. “Love one another ... as I have loved you.” That’s a high bar. Also, you know, before *Jesus* came along the laws were clear – easy to understand. “Do not steal... Do not kill... Honor your father and mother.” ... It may have been hard to keep up with so many of them, but at least they were direct and tangible. A person could wrap their hands around them... and be pretty sure what each commandment was telling us to do – or to NOT do. +++ But *Jesus* commands us to love. Is that something you can really even do on command? How do you know when you’ve accomplished it? How do you know how much love is enough? Here’s an example of what I mean: If you’re thinking about stealing \$100 from your neighbor but you decide not to because you might get caught, – congratulations! – you’ve successfully followed the law about not stealing. Check it off. +++ But have you loved? +++ That’s a harder one. We have so many ideas about what it even means to love:... We fall in love. ... We say, “Love conquers all.” ... “Love means never having to say you’re *sorry*” ... “Love is blind.” ... “Love your neighbor as *yourself*.” ... “Love hurts.” ... “You can’t hurry love” ... Or, in the famous words of the J. Geils Band: “Love Stinks.” ... +++ ... Where do we even start? +++ I know I was throwing out a lot of clichés about love – but *really* – it’s not clear cut. – It’s not like simply refraining from taking that \$100. +++ Wouldn’t it be nice if you could just “love on command?” You could go about your day not worrying about it, not being particularly loving at all..., then when a situation comes up... say, you and some lady both reach for the same beautiful avocado at the grocery store... you pull your hand away... and you say, “Excuse me, ma’am, you take that avocado. I’ll find another one.” And BAM, there you go – you loved. Check it off. +++ Or maybe you save the last bit of ice cream to share with your spouse even though there’s really only enough for one serving, which you *could have* eaten right now. BOOM – now we’re two for two. +++ +++ If love worked like that, maybe we’d all be better at it than we are.

But do you think that’s what Jesus means when he says, “Love as I have loved you?” +++ Is *that* how Jesus loves? A series of one-off moments which, when strung together, allow us to sleep at night? +++ No. I don’t think so, either. +++ Jesus is somehow defined by his love – it’s the filter through which he looked at the world. – Love was his first and only response to every situation. In fact, it wasn’t even a response... Jesus’ love was already there – it pre-existed the situations he faced – it was the context for everything he did – and his

responses to everything that happened around him. +++ Are we capable of loving like that? Are you? Loving as Jesus loved is sounding harder and harder the more we think about it, isn't it? +++? He always knew the right thing to say – the right thing to do – to make his love work. But, for us, love can be pretty discouraging. Just dealing with our daily lives is exhausting... Too much to worry about... Too much to do... Too much disagreement and unpleasantness. Too much of our own stress and anxiety to keep it together for love. Too much for our love to keep up with. We feel our zeal to love transforming into despair for our incapability. +++ There's *too much* hunger... *Too much* controversy... – no matter which way you try to make a difference in the world, *someone* will disagree, *someone* will criticize, *someone* will question your motives. +++ +++ It's discouraging, isn't it? And it's daunting! >>> How can I love like Jesus when I don't have his perseverance – when I don't have his tenacity – his wisdom. ... How can I love like Jesus ... when I'm not God.

Does any of this sound familiar to you? +++ Do you wonder how you can possibly live up to Jesus' commandment to love as he loves? +++ Yeah, me too. +++ But, let's look back at John for a moment – maybe there's hope for us yet. +++ Jesus isn't so prescriptive with his commandment. Yes, he loves with a perfect love and he tells us to love like him – I get that. ... But he's not telling us we have to make the perfect loving decision every time. He's not telling us WE always have to know the right thing to say – the right thing to do...; and then to say them and do them with perfect execution to get the maximum loving result.

Technically – if we're going to love like Jesus, that's what we'd have to do. But, we are just not capable of it. +++ But, fortunately, that's not all Jesus says here. >>> He says to "abide in my love."" +++ "As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide... IN... M...Y 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." +++ Then – when we abide in his love – when we wake up with his love – when we eat breakfast in his love – when shop for avocados in his love – ... our lives are permeated with joy that springs from God Almighty. And when we live in God's joy – we are ready to love like Jesus Christ – not perfectly, as he loves, but, nonetheless, we are ready to love with a love that flows from the grace he gives us from living in his light.

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That brings us back to Uncle Matthew in John Denver's song. Uncle Matthew abides in the joy Christ's love – and so he reflects Christ's love back into his world. The song doesn't tell us that he loved this or he loved that – loved his family, loved the land, loved his old hound dog. NO... for Matthew... "Love is just the way to live and die." +++ Abiding in the love of Christ – so that his joy is in you – allows love to become the context for everything else. It permeates who you are. Love becomes, simply, the way to live and die. +++ +++ And Matthew had a hard life – his gentle and loving spirit didn't come from the lap of easy living. We heard in the song a few minutes ago... "I guess there were some hard times. And I'm told some years were lean. They had a storm in forty-seven. A twister came and stripped them clean. He lost the farm and lost his family. He lost the wheat and lost his home. But he found a family Bible. Faith as solid as a stone. So, yes, and joy was just the thing that he was raised on. Love is just the way to live and die. Gold is just a windy Kansas wheatfield. And blue is just a Kansas summer sky." +++ ||| +++ Joy... Love... Blues, or sadness,... it's all the same... it's all part of a life of joy, abiding in the love of Christ.

The Good News is that we don't have to live up to the perfect love of Jesus Christ – we don't have to set that as our standard, setting ourselves up for despair when we fail to reach it. Jesus calls us to abide in his love – to draw strength – power – and joy from him as our source and the origin of our love. +++ Last week, we shared the verses that immediately precede today's gospel reading. Jesus taught us that he is the vine, and we are the branches. Whatever fruit we bear springs from the nutrients and energy passed on to us from the vine itself. "Those who abide in me and I in them," Jesus said, "bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing." +++ Abiding love, like grace itself, does not depend on how much it is deserved by another. – No. When love... grows... out of the presence of Christ within us; when it's the outward... expression... of our inner life with him...; we are beginning to love as Christ loves us.

Maybe this love – the love of God in Christ – is the **new song** the Psalmist sings about today. It’s not a song of lament – a song of falling short of the Lord’s expectations. No, this is Doxology! In the love of God, something new is happening. Love... Joy... “O sing to the LORD a new song, for he has done marvelous things... He has remembered his steadfast **love** and faithfulness to the house of Israel... Make a joyful noise to the LORD, all the earth; **break forth into joyous song** and sing praises. Sing praises to the LORD with the lyre, with the lyre and the sound of melody. With trumpets and the sound of the horn make a joyful noise before the King, the LORD.”

It’s so fitting that we are talking about these portions of the **Holy Scriptures this morning, on Youth Sunday**... This is a time of transition for these young people of Hilltop Church. Some are being confirmed as members in their own right, as adults in their faith. We are preparing to say goodbye to others, as they’ll soon be graduating high school and going away to college and beyond. It’s a time to think back about the years they’ve been among us – and for their families it’s a time to reflect on the how they’ve grown into themselves over the years. When parents teach their children to share, to keep their hands to themselves, to say “I’m sorry” when they are wrong, and to use the magic words: “Please and Thank You,” they aren’t just teaching each of these things as one-off rules about how you’re supposed to live. Good parents teach their children **how to love** – they model it themselves every single day. They teach that Love and Joy are connected – and how they permeate everything else in life. +++ **Then...**, when children understand that love is **“Just the Way to Live and Die,”** ... **only** then..., are they ready to learn those **particular** lessons and rules about how to **show** their love for others. +++ +++ This is why it’s so important that one of the first things we teach our children – and for **us** to remember as well – is to have joy **in Christ... to abide in Christ’s love...** to have **joy** in it... **and then learn how to reflect it in their own lives.** +++ “I’ve got the joy, joy, joy, joy down in my heart (where?) Down in my heart. I’ve got the joy, joy, joy, joy down in my heart (where?) Down in my heart to stay.” +++ +++
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In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen