

Have you ever watched a potter working? The spinning potter's wheel with a glob of malleable clay becomes a bowl or a vase, a work of art, as it is shaped by the potter's hands. I remember one vacation bible school when my son, Aaron, had the children's undivided attention. Aaron threw pottery for a couple of years while he was in high school and he was gifted with a wheel. He brought the wheel and some clay, and spent a morning throwing pottery, as part of the Jerusalem Market Place experience. The children wiggled and squirmed, oohed and aahed, as the pottery took shape.

This was shaped by Aaron's hands. These pieces were shaped by his hands.

I wonder... who has shaped you?

The psalmist suggests, as translated by Eugene Peterson that we are all shaped by God, "You shaped me first inside, then out... you know me inside and out." We were all handcrafted by God in our mother's wombs. Our psalmist today confesses that God continues to shape the people of God through refining fires, while keeping them in the land of the living and bringing them out into spacious places. "You, O God, shaped me first inside, then out," confesses the psalmist.

I wonder... who has shaped you?

Our passage today from the Gospel of John opens with a poignant moment between Jesus and his disciples. Jesus has spent three years shaping the motley crew he collected and called his disciples – fishermen, tax collectors, zealots, betrayer and denier. Jesus has shaped the disciples through the rhythms of his life: from his healing acts of compassion, to his times of solitude in

prayer; from the breaking of Sabbath rules, which revealed deeper truths to communion at table, with the least and the lost; from receiving extravagant gifts with grace, to challenging unjust principalities and powers. Jesus has shaped the disciples through the loving rhythms of his life and now he asking them to claim the love that he has so generously shaped them with. “If you love me,” said Jesus, “you will do what I have been doing among you, keeping the commandments... loving God and loving neighbor.”

“If you love me...” I don’t know about you, but conditional statements are not my favorite. When somebody begins a statement with an “if” I am always on edge waiting for what is next. Conditional statements, especially from the mouth of Jesus seems to contradict my experience of “grace”. There is no “if” in grace, it is simply offered through Christ Jesus. So, what was Jesus getting at in this text?

This passage is part of the scene that starts with the narrator announcing that “Jesus knew that his hour had come for him to pass on from this world.” Jesus had gathered the disciples one last time and was doing his best to encourage them, to console the chaos, confusion and concern mounting as Jesus shared what was to come... betrayals, denials, and his death. Jesus’ conditional “if” is actually his instruction to the disciples about how to best navigate what is to come, “Do what I have been doing among you... loving God and loving neighbor.” If you have been shaped by my love these past three years, if you love me, then honor me by living and loving others, as I have lovingly lived among you.

I'm sure pastors are not to share much about the congregations they have just left, but I know that as I left Garden Grove words similar to Jesus were on my heart, "If you love me, if my ministry has meant anything to you... then do what I have been doing among you after I leave." We honor those who have led us with love by not giving up or giving in when the way forward seems difficult. We honor those who have led us with love, by continuing the difficult work of loving others in the face of obstacles. Early in my ministry I read what a wise pastor once wrote to the congregation she served as she prepared to leave, "The greatest compliment you can give my ministry among you all these years, is to continue to serve God to your fullest with all the gifts God has generously given you – continue to deeply love God and neighbor, and serve faithfully bringing glory to God."

Jesus was filled with compassion for his disciples as he spoke to them. Jesus was filled with hope for the way in which his disciples would respond to the reality of his impending death. Jesus' words were something akin to *keep on keeping on*, my friends, just as we have been doing together these past three years. We have faced plenty of obstacles together, yet God has never abandoned us. Keep on loving, as I have loved you. Never give up the way I have taught you to live among others, keep on keeping on, dear disciples.

Leadership change is never easy, but we honor leaders who have led us with love by continuing the work that they have taught us. Jesus said to the disciples, "If you love me, show it by continuing to do what I have done among you."

In 1<sup>st</sup> John we read that “God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them.” Jesus is saying the same thing to his disciples, “I am in the Father, and you in me, and I in you... you know the Spirit, because the Spirit abides with you, and will be in you.” Once again through John’s Gospel, we hear of the relational nature of our faith. Jesus says to his disciples, “Abide with the Spirit, with God, and with me.”

Here is a bit of an English lesson for us this morning: As an intransitive verb “abide” means to continue in a place, as well as to remain stable or fixed in a state. Our stable or fixed state according to this passage is love. Remain in love. Abide in love, says Jesus to the disciples.

Yet, do we know ourselves to be loved by God? Henri Nouwen reminds us that “to love is to think, speak, and act according to the spiritual knowledge that we are infinitely loved by God.” You and you and you are infinitely loved by God... when is the last time your rested in this truth? When is the last time you allowed God’s lavish love to wash over you, enfold and encircle you? The disciples were infinitely loved by God and so Jesus presses them, “Do you believe this?” If you do, then love as I have infinitely loved you.

Our English lesson continues, for it is interesting to note that as a verb “abide” can also be a transitive verb. As such “abide” means “to bear patiently and to endure without yielding.” This is instructive given our text today, because the only way the disciples can keep on keeping on, keep on loving as Jesus has loved them, is by the power of the Advocate, the Spirit of truth at work in and through them. The only way they will be able to bear

patiently with their neighbors or endure without yielding their love for their neighbors is by abiding in the Spirit. Keeping the commandments Jesus taught us – loving God and most especially loving neighbor – is not easy, but it is our call. As Henri Nouwen writes, [We are] called to make [God's] love visible in this world." "If you love me," says Jesus, "you will love others as I have loved you."

We have been shaped by God's infinite love. Yet, how are each of us individually and communally making God's love visible?

Or put another way, who are we shaping with the love of God, as a church? Or who are you shaping with the love of God, as you walk through life?

This past week I met with Heidi Mayer, the founder of Youth Hope. I know that many of you know her. But, I wanted to share with you my first impression of Heidi - God's love exudes from her being, as she talks about the "Youth" of Youth Hope. Love, though, is not an abstract philosophical concept or a feeling to her. Love made visible through Heidi is a lived commitment to the love God has generously poured into her life. Heidi has been shaped by God's love and her life is being lived in response to Jesus' question, "If you love me," for her life is responding saying, "I love you and will keep your commandments," even though the way might be difficult.

As many of you know, Youth Hope is a messy and complex ministry. A ministry that requires of its volunteers a willingness to accept and love youth wherever they may be. It is a seed planting ministry of hope, which reaches youth who often fail to see their own worth. Youth Hope is a ministry that experiences many failures, but also

beautiful fruit in due season. Heidi shared with me a couple of stories. Through this text this morning, I hear Jesus' compassionate words encouraging Heidi and to her volunteers, "Keep on keeping on Youth Hope, for if you love me you will keep my commandments," and my love will be made visible.

I absolutely loved Heidi's passion that was broken open while she was a chaperone on a senior high mission trip, with her own child. Her mission was to protect her own child from the homeless people in San Francisco, whom she perceived as dangerous. On that mission trip, Heidi met a young woman living on the streets, who literally changed the trajectory of her life. She heard anew Jesus' "if" and began to love, as Jesus loved, in a powerful new way. Heidi has been shaped by love and now Heidi is shaping lives by love by the power of the Spirit at work in and through her.

What I appreciated most about our conversation though, was her admission of how difficult it has been at times to keep on keeping on. She has wanted to give up numerous times. The work is just too messy, too difficult. But, youth shaped by God's love through Heidi, cried out to her in expletives she did not share, "Do not leave us orphaned." Heidi and Youth Hope were the only people in their lives making visible God's love. And so, Heidi continues to make God's love visible through Youth Hope – through its part-time staff and volunteers – who make a safe place for youth to experience God's visible love – not through evangelistic words, but through concrete actions of hospitality, as well as accountability. Youth Hope is an organization that has responded to Jesus' "If."

What about us? As a church, who are we shaping by God's love? How are we making God's love visible?

One of the most telling questions for any faith community to ask themselves is this: "If we were to close our doors would the community in which we are planted notice?" I am not talking about the impact of the physical building, as that would probably be noticed if a church was brought to the ground and new construction was erected. I'm talking about a church's impact on their community through service. Is there a particular ministry that is making God's love visible that would be devastating for the community to lose?

As the psalmist wrote of the people of God, "God has brought us out to a spacious place." As we continue to navigate this new beginning under my pastoral leadership, let us listen deeply to the Advocate, the Spirit of truth, at work within us and through us. Who is God calling us to be? What is God calling us to do to make God's love ever more visible to the community in which God has planted us?

I'm sure you have noticed by now that I like to pose questions when I preach, for I believe they will stir our imaginations as a church.

If you love me, you will keep my commandments," said Jesus. Yet, what does it mean for this particular church to abide in Jesus' love and emulate his love which heals, feeds, teaches, forgives, confronts, crosses boundaries, and sacrifices for the other? Friends, we are not orphaned or abandoned, for the Advocate, the Spirit of truth is with us and in us, empowering us to respond. We

are shaped by love, let us love others as we are infinitely loved by God. Amen.