

## Love one another to death, also to life!

Sermon by Pastor Dan Harrison, Church of the Covenant, 12/22/19

Last week we were fortunate enough to experience “love” in the form of a panel on that very topic, which included our dear friends Rabbi John Nimon from Agudath Shalom Synagogue here in Lynchburg and Shaykh Ahmed Abdur Rashid from the Sufi One World Community in Bedford. The topic was rich in depth and I only wish we had had more time to explore it as a group. However, we indirectly concluded that our very nature is that of Love and that God is Love. We each found our faith traditions to echo a basic anchoring in Love itself. We cannot escape this reality. Rabbi John even left us with material to study, and that literature contained within it an interesting conclusion when one author quoted from the musical *Les Miserables*: “To love another person is to see the face of God.” *That’s it!* I thought to myself as I read it. That’s what our co-founder Bev Cosby spend years teaching this community: *Jesus is hidden in the suffering around us. If you want to find Jesus, find those who are suffering the most— because that’s where Jesus is.*

Jesus isn’t hidden within the walls of institutional church or within the religion we have created. No! Jesus is in “*the least of these.*” Granted, Jesus is in each of us of course, but more importantly Jesus is most present in those who are suffering at the hand of their oppressors: Poverty, persecution, displacement, homelessness, sickness, abandonment. For some reason many Christians believe that Christ is limited to them because they bear Christ’s name in their identity. But this is absolutely false. Jesus is in all of us; our very nature demands connection with God; we all awaken to it at various points of our lives. My prayer for us as faith community this Christmas season is that we awaken to it more fully than ever, that we find the love, and that we find the joy that comes with it.

As you may remember from past Christmases, my favorite Christmas character—who I would deem a Christmas hero—is *Joseph*, Jesus’ adoptive father. For me, he displays and ultimate openness to possibility and defies culture in defense of God’s plan unfolding. As we read in the Scriptures, Joseph is put into a difficult situation when his fiancé is pregnant with someone else’s child. It takes a miracle for him to swallow his pride and adopt the child as his own, and to love his wife unselfishly. But he does it! And from his action, he imparts something upon Jesus that we still are attempting to emulate to this day: True compassion. I’ll quote from my sermon last year on this very topic:

*We often think of Jesus’ compassionate nature descending from his Holy Father above, with little thought about his stepfather who raised him as his own. If you know anything about small villages and interlinked families, you know they love to gossip. Do you not think that the suspicious nature of Mary’s sudden pregnancy while apart from Joseph still, became a rumor that people would pass around throughout Jesus’ life? Do you think this incredible compassion that Jesus showed to the adulterous woman in John 8, when the men stood with stones in their hands and asked Jesus “should we not kill her as the law says?” or earlier in John 4 when Jesus observes that the Samaritan woman he quickly befriends at the well has had less than ideal domestic relationships with various men, but has no inkling within him to judge her AT ALL... do you not think that Jesus gained this incredible compassion from his humanly father first? The man who loved him and his mother with everything he had. Jesus had a real-life example all along. This love we often chalk up to something that exists far outside of our human ability but I tell you, no. It is in us. It has always been in us. Let it awaken. Let that love awaken. As Joseph demonstrated love as a father, and as Jesus would carry on in his love as a son, we too must carry on in the same unabashed, unashamed,*

*relentless, radical, human love. Jesus said, "this new command I give you: Love one another as I have loved you." Jesus loved humankind with everything had, including his very life. This is the love we must have for one another. [sermon, 12/23/18]*

It came up, albeit briefly, in last week's panel discussion that Jesus had said, "*No greater love has a person than to lay their life down for another,*" but almost within the same breath and with the Shaykh's emphatic nod of approval, I commented on the fact that in many cases it is perhaps even harder to "live for someone than to die for them." And Jesus showed this in his *life* of ministry, suffering alongside the very people he ministered to, being ridiculed for their lack of purity, persecuted because they did not align with the so-called "religious"—and also in his death, as it was not a quick one, Jesus *lived* through unfathomable torture for us, his followers; he thought us worth *living* through it all for—in the name of love. He undoubtedly had learned this sort of compassion from his own human father, Joseph, just as much as from his heavenly Father above—if not more. The question then becomes are we "*Josephs*" for others in our lives? Are we living examples of compassion?

We must be. It is the only way. This world needs Josephs left and right. People who stick with it, through thick and thin, who don't give up, and love beyond all expectation, knowing that their love is at times the one thing that keeps those around them going... loving selflessly. Loving others becomes its own regenerative source of nourishment. You may ask, "How?" Well I don't mean loving in a toxic, unhealthy sort of way that pulls you into the darkness. I mean to love others in a way that brings you and them both, Joy! As the psalmist says, "Sorrow may last for the night, but joy comes with the morning" (Psalm 30:5b). And I proclaim to you the feature promise of Christmas itself: The morning has dawned! The Savior is born! Joy has come into our lives!

When we utter the name Jesus, we are speaking the ancient name of Yeshua/esheia (Joshua/Isaiah)—whose meaning does not elude us. It means simply: God saves! And Joseph named his son this sacred word. And on his son was conferred the additional title Emmanuel: God is with us! Go in this promise. Be a Joseph. Proclaim a truth of love lived out among those who need you most. Be compassionate, be ever-present-love that brings forth joy in all the lives you touch: your children, your family, your friends, your community, and without question—the stranger, the "other"; be compassion incarnate; it will bring you joy. Smile like the dandelion, whose existence is a promise: Love is everywhere—and you may be the only love some may ever see. So be the love this world needs. A love surrounded by authentic joy!

Shalom and Merry Christmas