

## **“Love is Patient”**

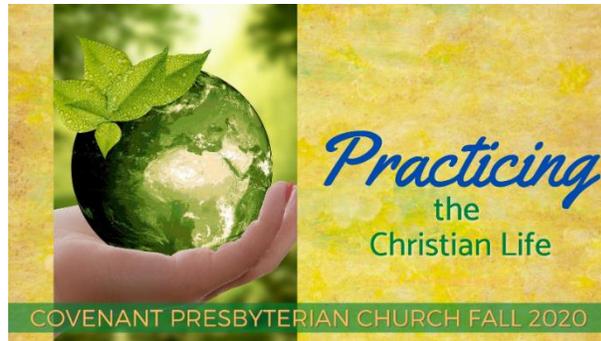
Matthew 22:34-40; Luke 10:25-28

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Last Christmas, my partner Sarah secretly knit me a pair of socks as a Christmas gift. They are beautiful, colorful, soft, and have little curves and threads that show the delicate maneuvering of her needles as she stitched together these socks. There are little mistakes, which I never would have noticed (but she pointed out), which make them personal and particular.

We were seated on the living room floor when I opened them, and I put them on immediately. I loved them. But, I have not worn them since. I love them too much. I can't bear the thought that I might wear them in too much, or get them snagged on something, or they get tangled into a big mess in the washing machine. I love them, so resting gently in my closet, I leave them.

I am surely not the only person who does this--sets aside our most prized possessions to only use, or wear, or touch on special occasions. The favorite quilt you never curl up with, the softest sweater you never wear, your favorite scented candle that you never light...When we love something, we don't want to break it or ruin it or use it up. When we love something, we so often leave it be. Set above or apart, but always a little far away.

But what then to make of this sermon series, "Practicing," where we are exploring the actual, physical, tangible practices of our life that shape us and might even shape our world? This week in particular, we're exploring the practice of loving.

Now it feels like a catch-22 to say just about anything on the topic of love, because we talk about love all the time! Love is everywhere! Or, at least, the rhetoric of love is everywhere. Love letters. Love languages. Love songs. Love stories. All you need is love. Choose love. Love wins.

We love love. And Christians in particular, love talking about love.

Our most often cited scriptures read like rhythms and travel like well-worn paths:  
*For God so loved the world...* (John 3:16)

*Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth. It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.* (1 Cor. 13:4-7)

And our scripture reading for today from the gospel of Matthew:

*When the Pharisees heard that he had silenced the Sadducees, they gathered together, and one of them, a lawyer, asked him a question to test him. "Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?" He said to him, "'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 22:34-40)

Thanks be to God for the words of scripture. The words of love. The good news of love.

What then, do we do, with these words of love? Sometimes, we set these apart too--for banners, for billboards, for weddings--set apart and afar from the day-to-day reality of what we actually do.

But the invitation of this series, "Practicing," is to take this far away special scripture, these hopes and wishes and intentions--of healing, or loving, and make them actual. Make them tangible. What does loving look like? When we read the commandment

to love God with all our heart, soul, and mind, and to love our neighbors as we love ourselves--what does that look like?

And especially now, where our usual ways of loving God, loving our neighbor, maybe even loving ourselves, have radically shifted? We don't go to church, take communion, or hear scripture in the same way, we can't safely exchange hugs and handshakes, help and care the way we used to; the ways we learn to value ourselves--love ourselves--if through our profession, our busyness, our achievement--have fallen short in a season of slow time. What now? What does love look like now?

The good news for us in this season of slow time and uncertainty is that our love for God is not bound to the walls of a building and our love for our neighbor is not annexed to an intention that never takes action. And our love for ourselves...without the condition of productivity or progress...we might return to chapter one, healing; surely we have work to do on loving ourselves, too.

But what does this love of God, love of neighbor or self look like, especially now? The author of the book we're working through in this series notes that--in any time but perhaps especially now--the act of loving is not to do heroic, big, extravagant things, but to do ordinary things with tenderness. What ordinary things do you do with tenderness? I invite you to really think about this. What ordinary things do you do with tenderness, care, kindness?

We might need to cultivate new practices of love for this season. New ordinary things, done with tenderness and regard--for ourselves, for others, and for God. This could be spiritual practices of prayer, meditation, connection; or gardening, harvesting, baking, writing; making phone calls or volunteering; tending carefully to someone else's vulnerability with regard and reverence; finding touchstones in our home or in the world to remind us of God's presence and God's love for us. It might feel slow. Be patient, trust the process of loving because it is a process, a practice. Love is patient.

And I don't know what those practices are for you, which relationship--the one with

God, the ones with others, or the one with yourself--might need a little extra loving kindness. But the call and the opportunity here is to cultivate practices of love--ordinary things done with tenderness. And if you don't get it right the first time, thanks be to God, love is patient. Love is kind.

This fall, I've been watching my partner Sarah knit something new for a friend of ours. A baby blanket for a little boy, on his way into the world. Every chance she gets she's working on this little blanket, and so I get to watch these strands grow into shape, and see that every tender stitch is an act of love. And when it's done and mailed miles and miles away, a little boy will be wrapped up and warm. I imagine she knit my Christmas socks with the same love.

Hopefully, the soft knit blanket gets used--even if a little worn out over time. The things we love are meant to be held close, engaged with, loved in action. That little boy will use his blanket, and I should start wearing the socks she knit me last year. Love is very patient, in this case.

The things we love deserve to be loved in action; our sacred scripture on love is not just meant for billboards and weddings. Love is patient, love is kind, love takes practice.

And thanks be to God, as we try our best to love and be loved, we are held by a patient, kind God who loves us all. Amen.