

**CHOSEN FIRST; JOHN 15:9-17; EASTER SIX; MAY 10, 2015; MOTHER'S DAY;
THOMAS H. YORTY; WESTMINSTER PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH**

I remember a mentor once offering this rule of thumb: "Never use the word love in a sermon unless it is used in the biblical reading." At first, this seemed like harsh advice. Aren't churches and Christians all about love? Why put a limit on the word? Shouldn't we use it more rather than less?

But the reason, he explained, is that the word "love" is overused, lacks clarity, and is so amorphous it doesn't mean much; unlike the Greeks who had four words for love and were, therefore, more intentional about what kind of love they were talking about.

For example, the word for 'love' Jesus uses in today's lesson is "agape" or self-denying love. The other options are quite different and include eros or romantic love; philia or friendship love; and storge or affection love. The English word "love" attempts to cover too much ground.

Fortunately, today's lesson from the Gospel of John uses the word "love" not just once but eight times. So on this Mother's Day we can feel free to invoke the word, which is a good thing, because the kind of love Jesus is talking about this morning is a lot like the love of a mother.

It's a poignant weekend for some of us. Yesterday we interred the ashes of Kay Timmerman – Carol's mother, my mother-in-law. Kay was a gracious, kind, devoted mother and grandmother and as consistent an example in her own living of Christian principles as anyone I know. Your support and the presence of many Westminster members and staff yesterday at North Presbyterian Church – Kay's church of fifty-three years – means the world to me and to our family.

Yesterday Val Cooley buried her mother Sally Wilson at Forest Lawn; a memorial service was held here for Sally – a long time member of this church. Sally grew up in New Orleans, she had something of the southern belle in her; she was elegant, gracious and refined. She was a lifelong Presbyterian and she loved this church and was a generous supporter and participant in our ministry for many of her 96 years.

Having just lost two mothers in this community I'm reminded how important it is to remember and celebrate our mothers. I remember my own mother from whom I inherited the perseverance I rely upon in triathlons. She was the older of two girls, grew up in Pittsburgh, graduated from the University of Pittsburgh and taught elementary school. She was kind, empathetic and the best listener I've known.

I think of my wife today whose devotion to our sons is a remarkable combination of tender and fierce – which I believe is common among many mothers.

I'll never forget witnessing her give birth to our first son and observing a side, or dimension of her that I had not yet encountered in our young marriage. It was a formidable combination of focus, determination and power; a strength, a resolve I realized then could accomplish anything.

In this morning's lesson Jesus says, "You did not choose me, I chose you." Unlike other disciples of other rabbis who chose their mentors based on what kind of life they wanted to emulate, Jesus says that he is the one who chose them – walking by the Galilean shore, meeting a wily tax collector whom he thought would make a good representative for the cause.

The fact that Jesus chose them gave those first disciples enormous staying power when the going got rough. Their fear of failure or the times when they did fail would not jeopardize their relationship with him.

They are the ones he wanted. He chose them. And when you add that to his calling them "friends" – not servants – but friends for whom he would lay down his life what we have is a radically different definition of discipleship from the old servant/master model common at the time. What distinguishes this model is intimacy and equality.

You see, as his friends he said we are included in the big picture of God's plan for creation – "I have made known to you everything I have heard from my Father." And "the Spirit will teach you everything, and remind you of all that I have said to you."

Just as we said last week, with the vine and branches metaphor, Jesus uses a few verses earlier, we are part and parcel of the very creative power of the universe. And as such our job is to produce fruit, which, in this gospel, means the fruit of love.

It is the fruit of love that will turn the human family and the universe around. And so we are not just Jesus' friends we are foot soldiers for a very specific and special kind of love – agape love – that has the power to make all things new and bring to completion God's purpose and plan for creation.

It all starts with Jesus choosing us, welcoming us, inviting us into a world we could not have imagined, and Jesus giving himself for us, sacrificing the most precious thing he had – his life – so that we would have the best life possible, so that we would know and experience first-hand that nothing surpasses our relationship to him. This sacrificing love is not withheld or reserved for any one, for any reason.

You know, that's not a bad definition of the love of a mother. It's a love we easily take for granted because it is a love that is never withheld.

But I don't want to look back on my life and say, "Oh my, I took the love of God and my mother for granted." We wouldn't be here without either of those loving presences in our lives; I dare say we wouldn't be able to face up to life, to the tough and dark side of life were it not for this love Jesus called 'the greatest love.'

Yesterday at Kay's memorial service our son Douglas who served a tour in Afghanistan said when he thought his job on a given day was difficult or dangerous, which it often was, he would think of his grandmother, Katie.

Her strength and love for him gave him what he needed for another day.

It was a high tribute to her but also a reminder of the deep well of strength each of us has.

They say we tap into only a tiny portion of our brain power, that we are capable of so much more with these complex, evolved thinking organs called brains. You could ask a similar question about the love with which we are brought into this world and sustained here by our mothers and God. Do we tap into its power?

Maybe it begins with taking time from our busy schedules to remember them, to thank them, to live by their example – not just one day a year but every day.

But if we stopped there it wouldn't be enough.

All of the mothers represented here by all of the people in this room, all of those mothers would want us to remember the other mothers this weekend and around the world; mothers who are struggling to raise their children in settings of violence, war, sexual abuse and poverty.

Tears are not enough. Political action is called for. Justice, generosity and a new order must be established.

Otherwise all we're doing when we celebrate Mother's Day or gather as followers of Jesus for worship is creating Hallmark moments – which will do very little to change the world. That's not the path we've chosen in the past and it's not the one we'll choose in the present either – at least if the love of God and our mothers has anything to do with it. Amen.