## Easter Sermon Series: New Birth-Faith, Hope, Love Sermon Title: Love John 13:1-8; I Corinthians 13:1-8a, 13 Salem United Methodist Church; May 1, 2016 Rev. Dr. Sue Shorb-Sterling

We are still in the Easter Season in the church. And it is still spring. Animals are giving birth to their young and with the Resurrection, we, too, can experience our New Birth. John Wesley who was an Anglican priest in the eighteenth century began a revival in England which became the Methodist Church. Our theology of our New Birth in Christ comes from his understanding of salvation. This is the last sermon in the series of New Birth with its three marks: Faith, Hope, and Love. Today we will focus on Love.

What do you love? I love fried chicken. I love my grandchildren. I love people. In these three sentences I have used the word, love, yet each time I meant something different. In the English language we only have one word for love. The Greeks had many. If I were to rewrite these sentences using the Greek words they would be like this. I phileo fried chicken. I storge my grandchildren. I agape people. These are examples of only three of Greek words for love. *Phileo* means to like something or to have a special affection for. It can also mean having a strong friendship. The name, Philadelphia, comes from *phileo* as in the city of brotherly affection, friendship, or love. So we can say that we love things and friends, but it means we like them. Storge is the love among family members. The love we have for family can be quite different from the love we have for people outside our family. It doesn't matter what our family members believe or what their political views are, they are family and we love them, sometimes in spite of themselves, too. We will often go to great lengths for family members without counting the cost. There can, also, be times in which we offer *storge* love to people outside our family in which we will go to great lengths for them. So we can say we love our children, spouses, siblings, and our parents, as well as others. The third type of love is *agape*. It is more than liking something or someone. Agape goes further than storge love. Agape love is God's love for humanity. It is unconditional love. There is nothing we can do to make God love us. Agape love is a choice or a deliberate act. It is not a feeling or emotion. Agape love is exercising one's will. It is about commitment. God commits to us through the covenant and we are to commit to God, love God, agape God through the covenant. Agape love is also what Jesus commanded us to do in the Gospel of John. We are to love one another because Jesus commanded us to agape our neighbors, no matter who they are. We are to agape even our enemies. Agape love says, "I love you because God loves you."

This is the kind of love that John Wesley referred to as a mark of a New Birth. The last few weeks we have been looking at Wesley's Way of Salvation. For Wesley, our salvation is a process and has different aspects of God's grace. First, there is the grace of God that follows us, leads us, directs us until we come to know who Jesus Christ is in our lives and have faith in him. Wesley called this Prevenient Grace or the grace that goes before. God is always going before us and arriving before we get there. The second aspect of grace is Justifying Grace or the grace that forgives us of our sins and makes us right with God, or justifies us to God. This can be a special moment in one's life when one realizes that Jesus died for me and my sins or this can be a daily occurrence of experiencing the forgiveness for our sins. And it can also be when one realizes that one needs to forgive others and receive forgiveness from others. Our New Birth occurs when we realize that our sins are forgiven. And our New Birth can happen again and again. The marks of this new birth are having a life filled with faith, hope, and love. This leads us to the third aspect of God's grace, Sanctifying Grace, or the grace that makes us holy and whole. Sanctifying Grace takes our brokenness and restores us better than new. Sanctifying Grace creates or restores a holiness within so it flows through us. Sanctifying grace reshapes us or remolds us back into the unblemished image of God, the image of Christ. We sin and God's grace forgives and makes us into new creations in Christ. Sanctifying Grace creates the marks of faith, hope, and love in our hearts. Sanctification is an ongoing process, too.

All this grace is a gift of God. We can do nothing to earn it. And God's grace never stops working in our lives. God is always going before us, always forgiving us, and always remaking us, taking our brokenness and making us whole and holy. John Wesley believed that we could be made perfect in God's love. This does not mean that we would do things perfectly, but that by God's grace our hearts could be

reshaped to agape each other and God perfectly. Wesley wrote, "By nature we are wholly corrupted; by grace we will be wholly renewed." Wesley also called sin a disease. The cure for sin was God's grace. We sin every day. Sin is like an illness, but there is a balm, a cure. Think of grace as a pill, a surgery, an ointment, or perhaps chemotherapy. The medicine cures. The surgery carves out the cancerous sin. The chemotherapy kills the sin within. One might say that Sanctifying Grace is like maintenance meds, the ongoing meds we take to stay healthy.

Sanctifying Grace transforms a heart filled with hate and anger and transforms it into a heart filled with joy and love. God's grace transforms our wills, affections, and our attitudes. With God's grace we come to love what God loves. Wesley wrote, "For true love, if it is to be shed in our hearts will constrain us so to do; since whosoever loves God with all one's heart cannot but serve God with all one's strength." This statement was written in response to Jesus commandment that we are to love one another. For Wesley this agape love comes from the heart of God into the human heart. This is why sometimes Methodism is described as the religion of the heart. Also, for Wesley receiving God's grace is experiential. We don't just come to know God's grace in our lives as in head knowledge, but we experience or are touched by it in our hearts. There are only about twelve inches between our head and our heart, but for some people, it may take a lifetime for God's grace to make that journey.

I experience God's Sanctifying Grace every day in my life. As I read devotional material, study the scriptures, pray both prayers of petition and contemplative prayers which are prayers in which I sit quietly, listening for God, or as I visit with someone, I sense that God is making me over into a more loving, more holy person. By God's grace, I am slower to anger and more patient. By God's grace, I seek to understand rather than judge. By God's grace, I don't keep score of the wrongs done to me. I am more accepting and seldom experience feelings of jealousy. I am not made perfect in God's love yet, but my heart's desire is to age gracefully, filled with God's love and not become a grouchy old woman. My heart's desire is to be someone who sees God's blessings in all things. How do you experience God's Sanctifying Grace in your daily life? How is God creating faith, hope, and love in your life? Making you whole and holy?

Here is an example of God's Sanctifying Grace in one person's life who I will call Doug. As a young man, he had no parents to guide him and he lived on the streets. Soon Doug became addicted to drugs and alcohol. A gang became his family. To maintain the *storge* love of the gang, he did whatever he was told to keep the gang family happy. Doug stole, mugged, burglarized, and sold drugs. He was in and out of jails. After a shooting incident in which the victim died, Doug was convicted and sent to prison for thirty years. While in jail, he came to know who God and Jesus is in his life. God's Prevenient Grace could not keep him out of trouble. Those were choices Doug made, but God's Grace was waiting for him behind the prison bars. Because of the ministry of a prison chaplain, Doug experienced agape love for the first time in his life. He experienced that God loved him just as he was, no matter what he had done. He came to understand that Jesus loved him so much that he died for his sins. Doug realized that all the things he had done to hurt others and to himself was forgiven. Doug also realized that he needed to forgive those who had hurt him, as well. With God's Justifying Grace, Doug received the New Birth. His heart was slowing being changed daily by God's Sanctifying Grace. Doug is out of prison now and he is a different person from the one who went inside. Once on the outside he found a United Methodist Church which received him with agape love. Doug began a business and now hires people who have served prison terms and have a desire to turn their lives around. Doug mentors his employees and witnesses to them. He also informs his customers of what God's grace can do, is doing, and will be doing in his life and in the life of his business. Doug's life is evidence of his New Birth as he lives in faith, offering hope, and sharing love.

Perhaps you have not had this kind of life in which there has been such a dramatic change like Doug's or perhaps you have. As we conclude this sermon series, reflect on how you have experienced these aspects of God's grace in your life? Where has God's grace gone before you? Where is God's grace leading you now? Have you experienced or are you experiencing the forgiveness of your sins, experienced or experiencing God's Justifying Grace in your life? And how is God's Sanctifying Grace in the process of transforming your will, your attitude, and affections, perfecting you so you can love as God loves?

**Resources:** The Scripture Way of Salvation by John Collins; "Salvation By Faith," "The New Birth," and "The Marks of New Birth," sermons by John Wesley; *Methodist Doctrine* by Ted Campbell; *Conversion in the Wesleyan Tradition* by John Collins; *The Journal of John Wesley*