



# Westminster Presbyterian Church

Richard Baker - June 4, 2017 Sermon

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## The Transitive Property of Love Part I: The Church

Pentecost Sunday, John 17:20-23

*Friendship extends to a person in two ways: first in respect to that person [the friend], and in this way friendship never extends beyond one's friends; but secondly, it extends to someone in respect of another, as, when a person has friendship for another person, and for his sake he loves all belonging to him, be they children, servants, or connected with him in any way. Indeed, so much do we love our friends, that for their sake we love all who belong to them.— Thomas Aquinas, Summa Theologica*

My Uncle Marty loved my father and therefore my Uncle Marty loved me. Uncle Marty wasn't my "real" uncle—he was my father's best friend from the time they were six until they were both well into their eighties—but maybe that made him love me all the more. Every summer when we would go down the shore (yes, in New Jersey, you really do go "down the shore") to Uncle Marty's place, he and I would end up playing horseshoes or walking on the beach, (you go "down the shore" but you still call that sandy area next to the ocean is "the beach"):

"So, Rich, your Dad tells me you're trying out for football this year." OR (a few years later)

"So, Rich, your Dad tells me you're liking college." OR (a few years later)

"So, Richard, your Dad tells me you and this girl are pretty serious."

He'd mostly listen, maybe slide in one of his funny sayings (he had a lot of them); any advice was proffered indirectly—usually through the funny sayings.

My Uncle Marty loved my father and therefore my Uncle Marty loved me.

If you love someone, all other things being equal, you also love what that person loves. I call this the *transitive property of love* like the transitive property in arithmetic. If  $A=B$  and  $B=C$ , then  $A=C$ .

If A (Uncle Marty) loves B (my Dad) and B loves C (me), then A loves C.

Of course, I did slip in that qualification, "all other things being equal," because there are variations, limiting cases, and even outright exceptions, to the rule. Pickled pigs' feet, for example.

My grandfather loved pickled pigs' feet; my grandmother loved my grandfather, but she did not love pickled pigs' feet. She loved how my grandfather loved pickled pigs' feet, so she served

them up on his birthday and other special occasions, but she herself did not love pickled pigs' feet. And sometimes—here's an even more limiting case—we can't even love how the person we love loves something; it just baffles us. So we tolerate and accept the thing the person loves because we love the person. In-laws, for example . . . can fall somewhere along this spectrum. And then there are flat-out exceptions. If we love a person (B) and that person "loves" (or better, thinks he loves) something or someone (C) that we believe is genuinely harmful to the person we love, then we don't love C all; in fact, we hate C—it's hurting the one we love. And yes, the love can get corrupted at other points too. A "loves" B and B loves C, but A hates C because A perceives C as threatening his relationship with, even his control, of B. But that's not love, that's jealousy.

But these variations, limiting cases, and exceptions only prove the point. In general, love follows the transitive property: love flows. And of course the transitive property doesn't go from just A to C. Love can flow from A-Z and back again. In fact, love can flow from A to nth power to Z to the nth power and back again. You can hear it in Jesus' great pastoral prayer for the church: God the Father loves Jesus the son, Jesus the son loves the church, which is his body in the world, therefore God loves the church and the whole world. And so Jesus says in his pastoral prayer:

*I in them, Father, and you in me, that they may become completely one, so that the world may know that you have sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me.*

Love flows: from the Father to the son, from the son to the church and to the world. And because the Father loves the Son, and the Son loves the church and world, the Father loves the church and the world. Love flows.

Except when it doesn't—which seems like a lot of the time, at least in the world and the church—why just take a look at social media.

It's been called "social media tribalism"—this tendency of social media to divide us into social networks or "tribes" of people who like the same things, believe the same things, think the same way, see the world the same way, in general share an identity—and spend their time *trolling* all those who don't.

And by the way, "troll" as a verb has now made it into the dictionary: to troll: "to intentionally antagonize others online by posting inflammatory, irrelevant, or offensive comments or other disruptive content." Love flows—except on the world wide web, where it's restricted exclusively to the boundaries of "my tribe."

Of course, to call our social media groups "tribes" is a gross overstatement and in fact terribly unfair—to tribes everywhere as traditionally understood. Really: Anyone with even a nodding acquaintance with history, anthropology, or historical anthropology, knows that, on innumerable occasions, tribes (as traditionally understood) have been able to cooperate, make peace, live peaceably with one another, and even to recognize the humanity of one

other. Would that we could say the same about all the “sub-reddit” tribes on Reddit. By the way, in case you (blessedly) don’t know, Reddit is a website, where tribes go to be tribal—in the worst sense of the word.

And yes, I know, the church has its own long, sad history of tribalism. (Yes, today is Pentecost, the birthday of the church: so we need the twirlers but we also need to speak the truth in love.) Love hasn’t always flowed through the church, much less beyond her to the world. Persecution, bloodshed—cruelty, inhumanity, some of the worst atrocities imaginable, and some beyond all imagining—the sins committed in the name of the church, the faith, and God are beyond all earthly reckoning, and many have turned away in disgust because of that. And this is true not just of Christianity but of all other great faiths as well. The best things when corrupted become the very worst, and our human religious impulse—our need for God and for righteousness—is a case in point.

But notice this: all the great faith traditions—including ours—have the resources for their own reformation within them. You counter the misuse of the Bible not by abandoning the Bible but by reading the Bible faithfully and well. You counter false Christianity not by rejecting Christianity, but by showing what true Christianity looks like. Likewise, the Hebrew Scriptures and Judaism, the Koran and Islam, the Vedas and Hinduism, etc. In all these, there are teachings emphasizing God’s universal love and care for all humans and for all creation, teachings telling us to go and do likewise. If we love God, and God loves them, then . . . well, then it follows: as simple as A-B-C, the transitive property: we must love them, too.

“Reformed and always reforming”—that’s one of the guiding truths—perhaps the guiding truth—of our Reformed-Presbyterian tradition, meaning that we go back to the sources (church teaching, the Bible, ultimately to God in Jesus Christ) to renew our faith and reform its corruptions. And as much as we might like to think so, this movement did not begin with Martin Luther or John Calvin, it’s been with the church from the beginning; nor is it exclusive to the church or even to religious traditions. One of the beautiful things about this country is the way our best leaders—Abraham Lincoln, Jane Addams, and Martin Luther King Jr. come immediately to mind—have gone back to the sources, the founding truths (the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution) to renew and reform our country, to summon the better angels of our natures.

Reformed and always reforming—but I’m not sure you can say that about twitter.

*Whaddya know? Because you know what you know you know, and, you know, you gotta go with what you know.*

I can still hear the horseshoe thudding in the sand as Uncle Marty slid that saying in. I mean, here I am today, up here pronouncing broadly on the internet, the church, religious faiths and their corruption, church history and the history of our country—but really what do I know?

What I know, and what I know I know, is that I've experienced the transitive property of love moving through the church, and in particular, through this church, through Westminster Presbyterian. You can see it moving in the mission trip, the choir trip—all the summer learning and serving trips—we commissioned this morning: because God loves the world through Jesus, if we love God and Jesus, we must love—and serve in love—those whom God loves. Love flows. I've experienced it for two years now on the youth choir trip, not just in the love and kindness the choir members show for one another which is in itself beautiful (I wish I had had something like that as a teenager), but also in the way they love the churches they sing for and are loved by those churches in return. Love flows.

And yet for all that, I have to tell you: sometimes, especially on holidays—Christmas Eve, Easter, Thanksgiving Sunday, Mothers Day—after the service, when I'm standing back there [gesture], greeting people, I feel a little like the pickled pigs' feet salesman. I can read it in their faces, their wary skittishness: "I'm here only because it's important to my mom/parents, brother/sister niece/nephew, son/daughter, family/friend—so don't try to sell me any of your pickled pigs' feet."

And I want to say to them: "It's OK—no sales pitch, I promise. By being here, you're honoring the love you've been given. You're loving something—or at least tolerating it—because someone you love loves it. That's a beautiful thing, part of love itself, God's love."

But instead I say only: "Thanks for coming; it's good to see you here." But what I'm thinking, what I'm praying, is: "Love flows. C'mon, love, flow."

And today, if you want to see an image of that, just wait a few minutes; wait until we are ordaining and installing our new elders and deacons. Just wait a few minutes for the laying on of hands—and know that, whether you come forward or not, you are part of that. From the Father to the son, from the son to the church to the world, stretching all the way back to all those who have gone before us, that great cloud of witnesses, and stretching all the way forward to all those who will come after us till kingdom come: their hands are on our shoulders, and ours are on theirs. I can feel Uncle Marty's on mine.

God's love is flowing to us all and through us all. Love flows. We are part of that. From A-Z and back again; from A to nth power to Z to the nth power and back again— a million to the nth times over. That's what we are a part of today, and everyday, as part of the church. So in a few minutes look for it, feel it, know it, and know that you know it: *I in them and you in me, that they may become completely one, so that the world may know that you have sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me.*

Love flows.

Through Jesus Christ our Lord—thanks be to God.