



THICKER THAN LIQUOR
John 13:31-35, Acts 11:1-18

Our provocative sermon title comes from a short story written by the poet – writer – and farmer Wendell Berry. It was my mentor, Eugene H. Peterson who shared, “I have learned more from this farmer writer than all my academic professors about pastoral theology.”¹ One of the characters in the story is **Uncle Peach** – who is really more of a rotten apple to everyone except his sister Doris Catlett. She loves and believes in him when nobody else will. One day after a drunken binge when Uncle Peach is thrown out of a motel because he can’t pay his bill Doris Catlett – along with her seventeen-year-old son – go to rescue him again. The seventeen-year-old has seen this episode played out before – and calls it ‘**one of Uncle Peach’s spells.**’ The son cannot take it anymore and he tells his mother “Why don’t you let him get on by himself the best way he can? What’s he done for you? To hell with him!” His mother understands his response – but replies, “**Blood is thicker than liquor.**”

The son replies, “**Blood is thicker than liquor?**”

“Yes,” the mother replies, “**Thicker than liquor too.**”

From that moment on every time they rescued Uncle Peach – the son would say underneath his breath “**Blood is thicker than liquor!**” The mother would smile and say, “**Yes, it is.**” As you read the story it is easy and right I believe to substitute the word ‘**Love**’ for blood: “**Love is thicker than liquor.**”²

It is one step in faith to **believe** in Jesus – the second step required is to **behave** like Jesus. Christianity is not a philosophy – but a relationship and lifestyle. That is why Jesus said, “I am the Way – the Truth – and the Life.” Eugene Peterson teaches correctly - “The Jesus way wedded to the Jesus truth brings about the Jesus life.”³

C. S. Lewis wrote, “To love at all is to be vulnerable. Love anything and your heart will certainly be wrung and possibly be broken.” He further shares “The only place outside of heaven where you can be perfectly safe from the danger of love is hell.” This Doris, the sister of Uncle Peach, knew and practiced.

Dr. James Denny, the famous Scottish preacher, used to stand before his Protestant congregation with a crucifix and shout, “God loves you like this!”

In **John 13:31-35** – Jesus gives his farewell command to his disciples. His time with them in the flesh would be short. If they were ever to hear his voice – they must hear it now. He had already taught them to grab a towel – rather than use their tongues to solve any disputes among them. He knew the tongue had to be tamed – for the world to ever begin the healing process necessary for unity and salvation.

Jesus knew and taught that the power of love was the real defining line of our character and conduct. That character and conduct had to be anchored and centered on God. It is here that our lives would reveal their true source and substance. Jesus knew his love revealed and demonstrated at the cross would be the most revolutionary force in the world. It had to be thicker than liquor, racism, classism, and nationalism as our lesson from the book of **Acts 11:1-18** revealed.

If we could only remove the story of Adam and Eve from the Bible, the Bible would be reduced to a good book of moral niceties. However, the Adam and Eve story demonstrates for us that we are in the midst of a great spiritual struggle and warfare. This struggle is an ongoing historical reality everyday of our lives. There are rivals for the human soul and spirit. You can't maintain fellowship with God – if you love something else more.

A few weeks ago, my Sunday School class studied a lesson from **I John**. The same disciple (John) who wrote the gospel – also wrote 3 smaller letters. He writes these letters to a church that is in a mess. These folks in Ephesus and elsewhere were not getting along. He reminds them – and us – that the only Christ-authorized mark of discipleship is our love for each other. Ask yourself today “Is this how God and others recognize us today?” One of the members of the class asked ‘Why does God love us at all?’ There is only one right answer – because it is God’s nature to love.

Our lesson today reminds us that in order for us to live and love the right way – we must first start with God and not ourselves. If we want to love the right way, we have to deal with God the right way. God and love cannot be separated.⁴ God is love – but not all love manifested in our world is of God. That is why we need the Holy Spirit to give us wisdom and discernment. If you have a pen or pencil – simply write down these words, **“Why is loving such a challenging and difficult thing to do?”**

A young couple went on a spiritual life weekend and came home on fire – excited for God. They went to their pastor, and said “Pastor, we want to do something big and great for God.” “Fantastic,” he said. He wrote down the names of 4 couples in the church who had not been in attendance for awhile and said, “They need your Christian fellowship and encouragement.” “Oh, no, you don’t understand, pastor. We want to do something really important for God.” So the pastor gave them 4 more names to visit and encourage. Jesus worked in the ordinary – so we are called as well.

Many folks are waiting for some grand assignments – and we forget the biblical witness and example we already have. You need to start where you are. Start with your own church family and neighborhood. Make the word become flesh right there.

Yes, volunteer for the nursery – sing in one of our choirs – teach a Sunday School class, tutor a teenager at Cross Connection. This is how Christ loved and served. The list and opportunities are legion. There are openings right now for you to put your faith into action. One of the great hymns of the church shares: “Not with swords loud clashing – or roll of stirring drums – but with deeds of love and mercy the heavenly kingdom comes.” Jesus washed his disciples’ feet - he welcomed children – ate dinners with sinners – helped those who were sick or suffering.

From the Broadway musical South Pacific come these insightful words:

“A bell is not a bell – till you ring it.
A song is not a song till you sing it.
Love in your heart is not put to stay.
Love is not love – till you give it away.”

When I sing the opening words of “**Amazing Grace**” – “Amazing grace, how sweet the sound that saves a wretch like me,” it is a wake up call that you and I were no bargain for the Lord. It cost Christ dearly to forgive us and love us. His love had to be greater and thicker than sin.

So in light of this – I want to end this sermon with a call and challenge. Some time in the next 7 days – I want you to extend yourselves in the Jesus Way – to someone you don’t expect to reward you or love you back. Risk yourselves as C. S. Lewis writes – and the cross demonstrates. I want you to do this – not as a way to earn your salvation – but as a reflection of the salvation we have received.

Annie Johnson Flint wrote this:

**“We are the only Bible
The careless world will read,
We are the sinner’s gospel,
We are the scoffer’s creed;
We are the Lord’s last message
Given in word and deed.”**

Paul writes to the church at Corinth and instructs them to be a love letter from God to someone in need. Our church – our community here in New Holland and beyond, the homeless at Water Street, the women of the Luke 19 Project need to receive such letters. Remember, love is greater and thicker than liquor – and all the ‘isms’ of the world.

Let us now close and share together in the time-honored words of St. Francis and his great prayer:

Lord, make me an instrument of thy peace;
where there is hatred, let me sow love;
where there is injury, pardon;

where there is doubt, faith;
where there is despair, hope;
where there is darkness, light;
and where there is sadness, joy.

O Divine Master,
grant that I may not so much seek
to be consoled as to console;
to be understood, as to understand;
to be loved, as to love;
for it is in giving that we receive,
it is in pardoning that we are pardoned,
and it is in dying that we are born to eternal life.

Just do it! Believe in Jesus! Behave like Jesus!!

Amen and amen.

Reverend Eric S. Ritz
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ENDNOTES

¹ Eugene H. Peterson, **TAKE AND READ: Spiritual Reading; An Annotated List**, William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, Grand Rapids, MI, 1996, page 63.

² Wendell Berry, **THE WILD BIRDS: Thicker Than Liquor**, North Point Press, 1985, pages 3-26.

³ Eugene H. Peterson, **THE JESUS WAY**, William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, Grand Rapids, MI, 2007, page 4.

⁴ Eugene H. Peterson, **CONVERSATIONS: The Message Bible with Its Translator**, NavPress, Colorado Springs, CO, 2007, page 1931.