

**May 3, 2015**

**“Intertwined in Love”**

**[Easter 5B: Immanuel Presbyterian Church, Los Angeles, California]**

**John 15.1-11**

**[I John 3.18-24 or 4.16b-21]**

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“For as long as I live, I will not let this suffering be normal, something we just accept,” said a Christian aid worker describing her work with Syrian refugees in 2013. “I find God,” she later said to her family, “in the suffering eyes reflected in mine. If this is how you [God] are revealed to me, this is how I will forever seek [you].” These are the words of Kayla Mueller, who with a colleague in August 2013 visited a Doctors Without Borders hospital in Aleppo, Syria, and on their way to the bus station to leave, both were taken captive by the terrorist group ISIS, or the Islamic State.

Kayla had begun her volunteer service in middle school, working in local Kiwanis Club events and homeless shelters. In high school she organized a protest to raise awareness about the genocide in Darfur, Sudan. As a senior in 2007, she received the gold President’s Volunteer Service Award for her work with Ameri-corps and Big Brothers Big Sisters, among many other groups. In December 2012 Kayla traveled to the Turkish-Syrian border to provide aid to Syrian refugees through the Danish Refugee Council. She was passionate about helping the refugees and raising awareness about the crisis unfolding before her. “Anger, sadness, and fear,” she wrote in her blog at the time, “are the best composts for compassion.”

After being taken captive in August 2013, it was spring 2014 before anyone would hear from her again—in the form of a letter sent out through fellow captives who had been released. On February 10<sup>th</sup> this year, her family received information of her death directly from ISIS, which was later confirmed by the U. S. State Department\* President Obama said of Kayla, “[She] represents what is best about America, and expressed her deep pride in the freedoms that we Americans enjoy, and that so many others strive for around the world.”+ Kayla gave her life in the

service of those she loved in Christ, intertwined with him—and them—in love.

We're presented with a powerful metaphor in today's scripture lessons which portray the passionate and expansive nature of the love of God, the love which is to characterize the Christian life. The love given us in Jesus Christ calls us to identify with the rejected and outcast, the dejected and unacceptable, often at great risk to ourselves, our prestige and even the security of our families. It's a love, like Kayla Mueller's, like Jesus' love, that risks death.

It's easy to talk about love and profess our openness, concern and compassion in the safety of polite conversation and debate. It's much more demanding and challenging to translate what we profess into actions, actions that risk our finances, reputation, social or economic security or even our lives. In the real world of business, human relationships, political and family life, and even in the church, love is something very difficult to demonstrate adequately and effectively.

Jesus knows this through his own experience in a world where he is misunderstood, betrayed, persecuted, misjudged and executed. In the passage in John's gospel, on the evening before his death, Jesus speaks to the disciples as being part of the vine, being part of him, and he pulls no punches with them. Being part of the vine is not an easy option. Jesus reminds us that we are subject to the attention of the vinedresser, who may prune, trim, and tidy the branches—that's us—so we may grow and be fruitful in our faith and ministry.

The key to growth, according to Jesus, is in abiding in him, that is, in being intertwined with the vine, Jesus himself. This may, he warns us, lead us where we'd rather not go. It will force difficult and demanding choices upon us. We'll need to learn the truth about love and correct the shallow and often sentimental understanding we have of it. Sometimes it may even lead to rejecting ideas and ideals the world holds dear. It may lead to the abandonment of old stereotypes

and beliefs about people, even those we know and love, in light of new revelations by the Spirit.

Think of the outmoded, even sinful, though almost universally accepted ideals the world has held in the past—slavery, the oppression of races and peoples, the subjugation of women, the suppression of those whose sexual preferences have not conformed to the highest ideals of so-called civilized society. Interlaced with the vine, in the spirit of Jesus, we will be led, we are assured, into conflict with the siren calls of those who want to take the easy road and avoid active involvement in confronting issues of justice in the world

Love, in the sense of being part of the vine, or being “in love” as part of the vine, means that we’re to be productive and bring forth fruit. If we don’t produce, we fail our faith, unwind our ties with the vine and die in the spiritual sense. The love we’re given in Jesus is not the love of “warm fuzzies” but a love that is life-changing and life-giving. It’s life-threatening as well, leading us to abandon self-seeking styles of life and materialism.

Love is a response, not a condition, a response to the love of God we have in Jesus and in the community of faith. Love in everyday life, creative and life-giving, is the corollary of God’s love given us in Christ. It’s the expected result, just as inoculation against measles brings resistance to the disease, or watering the garden enables plants to grow, or calling across a valley brings back an echo. Apathy toward the world is a negation of the love we are given as Christians. The welfare of our sisters and brothers in need is our concern and our ministry because it’s the focus of God’s love. Whenever and wherever the dignity or worth of the human being is denied by the world, the state, an institution or a person, God calls us to protest and to be involved in redressing injustice.

Ever since the time of Edmund Burke we’ve been told that all it takes for

evil to triumph is for good people to do nothing. By our silence we contribute to perpetuating injustice in the world. When we refuse to face the implications of racism, urban poverty or the growing division between the wealthy and the poor in our society and the world, we're in collusion with evil.

It's tempting for us to analyze the implications of love objectively, as something "out there" rather than as something demanding change by us. Jesus reminds us, we need to pay attention to issues closer to home. We need to examine our attitudes toward others when we think or speak of "them," especially when we use labels. When we look at those to whom Jesus ministers, we find the outcast, the marginalized, the excluded and the rejected, all of whom are beloved children of God. And when we find them in the church, all are intertwined with him, and us.

Often our love as a community of faith will be concerned with those in whom it's difficult to see any fruit. Yet Christian love is for the unlovely, even for those who are actively hostile and proclaim themselves as our enemies. Many who are active in the church's community ministry will attest to this. Being part of the vine leads to involvement with those facing tragedy, tempted by anxiety, fear of death, adversity or persecution and often suffering. Frequently their response to our love will be apathetic, negative or unforthcoming. Yet commitment to Jesus doesn't let us quickly evade the difficulties. It leads us to a costly identification with those to whom the world does not respond, or responds with a vengeance. Yet God's love knows no bounds or limits.

What might a world changed by love be like? There is a Jewish parable in the Midrash, the rabbinic commentaries on the Torah that have been passed down through the ages, a Jewish parable about Israel's deliverance at the Red Sea. It tells us God was busy that day and had left some angels in charge. The angels parted the water, let Moses and the Israelites across, then let the water go back

and drown the Egyptians. The angels shouted in exaltation! But when God returned, she was very angry. “What have you done?” God cried, “Don’t you realize the Egyptians are my children too?” God is love.

Or there’s the Vincent Harding’s black history book, *There Is a River: The Black Struggle for Freedom in America*, that tells about the suffering of slaves in southern Virginia in the 1830s.~ These slaves had the belief that their savior would come from Granada, be a mulatto, part black and part white, and he would save both the black and the white people. These folks prayed for God to save them and their owners, the white folks in the big house who whipped them, abused them and chained them even when they worked. They had compassion for their owners and looked for a new world, a world in which there would be no owners or slaves, where all would be free and equal. A vision of God’s realm of love.

Then there are the people of Baltimore today who, though having been directly affected by the injustice of police brutality themselves, which has resulted in the killing of Freddie Gray, nevertheless have protested peacefully. But when riots and looting broke out despite their pleas and a misguided few began to destroy resources essential to their community, they immediately came out on the streets again and began to clean up the mess. God is a lover of communities and people!

Jesus reveals God’s intent to have a category-less world, a world where there are no ins or outs, haves or have-nots, betters or lessers, but a world in which all are equal, equally served and equally loved. For in God’s eyes, all people are children of God. This is the love Jesus speaks of, embodies in himself and his ministry and grants us the capacity to have, share and give away as well. It’s a love that helps create a world with no stereotypes to box anyone in. A world in which people are intertwined in love, loving one another as God loves us. A love which

may call for the kind of sacrifice both Jesus and Kayla Mueller have made.

*AMEN!*

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\*“Greater love has no one than this’: Kayla Mueller remembered,” *Mission Crossroads*, PCUSA Mission Agency, Spring 2015, p. 4.

+ [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kayla\\_Mueller](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kayla_Mueller).

~Vincent Harding, *There Is a River: The Black Struggle for Freedom in America*, San Diego, New York, London: Harcourt Brace & Company, A Harvest Book, 1981.

Resource: *Good News*: Easter B 5, April 28, 1991, pp. 136-138.