

If you've been up to the church office anytime over the last week and half, you might have noticed something a little different about the office suite lately. Namely...we have a dog. Birdie is 12 weeks old and is hanging out with us until the end of the school year, while her mom our second grade teacher works. It's been nothing short of entertaining to me to see how instantaneously anyone who comes in the office changes the second that they see Birdie. They could be focused, on a mission, and then there's this puppy and they just melt. I have seen more adults sitting on the floor, talking in high pitched voices all because well...there's a puppy.

Now, of course, this has caused a great deal of reminiscing amongst all of us who have dogs at home. Memories flooding back from when our own dogs were puppies, and I realized how quickly those rose-colored glasses can get thrown on, and what a difference it makes when it isn't *your* puppy doing the frustrating thing. Multiple cases and points. Birdie is in her oh my gosh let me bite your shoelaces and untie your shoes phase. Naturally, my mind went to the very first time I met Scully and her little six week old self crawled in my lap and immediately ate my shoelaces. Now, when Birdie does it, I'm like, "oh Birdie, maybe not, but if you want to tug them a bit sure," whereas once Scully had been in the house for a hot second it was like, "Please just stop biting my shoes!" I watched the other day as

Birdie sat down to gnaw on the corner of a cardboard box by Laura's desk and I was like, "Aww she's teething..." while the Scully of yore screamed in my head, "You would yell at me when I ate cardboard because you were trying to move and said it was annoying!" The raucous, rambunctiousness of a puppy is immensely sweet when you can walk away from it, but when you can't...well, your bandwidth for handling it becomes thin. When it's not your puppy, love comes as freely and easily as handing that puppy back to it's owner. When it's your puppy...there are times when that love feels like a burden. Love suddenly becomes a matter of perspective depending on where you're sitting.

And let's be real, as a culture, we expound upon love waxing lyrical with all the flowery language we can come up with. How many songs, how many books, how many poems, how many works of art have been created all at the feet of that one idea: love? It's become almost a byword. All you need is love. Love will keep us together. Tis better to have loved and lost, than never to have loved at all. How do I love thee, let me count the ways? Love, in theory, much like a puppy, in theory, makes us wax on with nostalgia and whimsy, until reality sinks in. Until you bring that puppy home. Until we actually take God and Jesus seriously when it comes to the whole entire idea of...love. Then suddenly we understand why when the

second lesson says, “God’s commandments are not burdensome,” we can’t help but laugh, because, well...we tend to treat love like a burden.

We have a tendency to be super clear and super adamant about what scripture says when it’s *convenient* to what we want scripture to be clear and adamant about, however, when it’s clear and adamant about what we don’t want to hear, well, we tend to ignore it, or make it say something else, and our lessons today are kind of a perfect example of that. Let’s just lay it out there, the first lesson, the crowd that Peter is addressing is *shocked* that *even on the Gentiles* the Holy Spirit descends. Peter looks at their astounded faces and is like, “Uh yeah, that’s how this works. No one is capable of withholding the Holy Spirit from moving where it will. We kinda meant it when we said God shows no partiality, so yeah, the Gentiles are in.” The second lesson, the author of 1 John could give Shakespeare a run for his money on how much he talks about love, and this lesson makes it pretty clear, if you love God, then you love God’s children, *all* of God’s children. And if you love God’s children then you are fulfilling the commandments, and they aren’t burdensome, which means *love* is not burdensome. How does love relate to the commandments? Well, that’s where Jesus in our gospel comes into play. In the hours leading up to his death, Jesus wants the disciples to focus on one thing: he loves them, he *chose* them, and because

they know the depth of his love for them, that he is about to die for them, then this is the only commandment he gives them...love one another as I have loved you. Sacrificial, unconditional, I chose you kind of love. Who are we to love? *Even the Gentiles?* Yes! Because if you love God you love all of God's children and if you love God's children, you fulfill the commandments, and what is the commandment? That you love one another. It is a never-ending cycle of love and inclusion throughout these texts, over and over and over again. Love. Even the Gentiles? Yes. All of God's children? Yes. Love. And I think most of us want to kindly sit here and nod our heads and say, yes, of course, God calls us to love, I love my neighbor, it's not a burden! It's not a burden when we love those we *choose* to love, it's not a burden to play with the puppy who isn't yours. It's a burden when we realize God calls us to choose everyone, and that puppy is yours to love and care for throughout its entire life.

And I know, each of us is sitting here and if there was a thought bubble over our heads they would probably say, but I *do* love my neighbor. I *do* love God's children, so what's the big deal? The big deal is that our definition of love and God's are very different. Our definition of love tends to be based on conditions, on comfort, on what we are able to control and understand, and if it doesn't meet those criteria we refuse to engage. And

again, I know, we will want to say, but I do still love them! But more often than not that is us trying to let ourselves off the hook from what we refuse to learn about, what we refuse to change. We tend to feel it's too much to take on, love becomes a burden, and we opt to just...not.

This applies to almost every single area of our lives. It can come as close to home as right here in our own pews to out in the broader world. Each of us would proclaim, I would imagine, that we love one another here in this place. Yet...when we pass the pews are there people you avoid? Skip? When a meeting or a conversation hasn't gone well, have you written someone off or told others what happened rather than working it out with the person involved? When you've heard conversations about inclusion or equity, either here at church, at work, out in the world, has it been met with a scoff and an eye roll like why do we always have to talk about this? Or has it been met with a heart that says, maybe for the sake of my neighbor, for one of God's children, I need to learn a little bit more? So I can love them more fully as they are. When you've heard someone share their pronouns have you blocked it out or tried to explain why "they" is plural and shouldn't be used as singular instead of taking a step back and saying this is someone God has chosen and I want to love them as they are, not based on my definitions of who they are. When there are conversations about

homelessness, poverty, racial disparity and injustice is it easier to write it off because those things have always been there and what can I really do about them? Or is there an openness that says, I need to learn more about my siblings experience and *hear* them, so that I can better love them where they are in the world? So often we want love to be about us, how it can make us comfortable, how it can make us safe, how it can keep us from being challenged, and unfortunately, that's just not love. Jesus certainly didn't love the disciples comfortably, he died for them...and he called them and us to love with the same kind of take a step back from self kind of love that he shared with all whom he taught.

And let's be real. It's hard. Life is hard. Love is hard. But for as much as it isn't about us, we ourselves can be the best reminder of why this kind of love is important and life-changing. We've all had that time, that moment in our lives, when we were certain that we had found the thing that would cut us off from God's love. We can all pretend, but we all have had those things that we have done, things about ourselves that we're afraid to own and live out because we're certain they're the thing that will make us a burden. Each of us right now is thinking about it. That thing that in our heart of hearts we're like...God can't love that. And yet...God chose you. God loves you. God loves you fully. God loves you and it isn't a burden.

So if we have experienced that kind of life-affirming, life-giving, soul-changing love, why in the world would we want to be in the position of denying another that kind of love? And we might still be thinking we don't, but when we refuse to see and acknowledge someone in their full entirety, as they are, with the experiences they bring, the names they claim, the pronouns they use, the life they lead, then we don't we are proclaiming that love is a burden because it's just too hard to deal with all of that.

Y'all...God loves you. Jesus died for you. There is nothing you have done, nothing you are that could make God not love you. But it doesn't just apply to you. God loves the people living in tents right down the road from us. God loves the politicians we can't stand. God loves the kid who just wants someone to acknowledge their they/them pronouns. God loves the middle aged person who finally has the confidence to come out. God loves atheists. God loves every person of color who has experienced racism and microaggressions every day of their life. God loves us when we are shoe lace eating puppies just trying to find our way. God loves us when we get it wrong in the midst of trying to get it right. You are never a burden to God. And so may we stop seeing our siblings as such, and love them, love them, yes even love them, where they are, for who they are, because that is quite literally what Jesus called us to do. **AMEN!!!**