



Focus verses

“So if I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another’s feet. For I have set you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you.”
John 13:14-15
(NRSV)

“I give you a new command: Love each other. You must love each other as I have loved you. All people will know that you are my followers if you love each other.”
John 13: 34-35 (NCV)

“Dear friends, since God so loved us, we also ought to love one another. No one has ever seen God; but if we love one another, God lives in us and his love is made complete in us.”
1 John 4:11-12
(TNIV)

LEGACIES OF CARE

LESSON ONE: THE RADICAL LOVE OF JESUS

Opening prayer

“For God is greater than our hearts ...” – 1 John 3:20 (NIV)

*All of our capacity to love,
God is more
All of the compassion we show,
God is more
All of the mercy that wells within us,
God is more
All of the social justice we long for,
God is more
In all the ways that I am less
God is more.*

–V.M. Kabat

Introduction to the lesson

From the earliest civilizations, people have found ways to care for those who could not care for themselves. As populations grew, caring for all who lived on the margins of society became increasingly difficult. We will explore how societies, throughout the ages, have cared for their poor. We will look at the mutual forces involving church and government in these care-giving roles, and we will examine motivation and expectations involved in caring for “the least of these.” Undergirding the study will be the radical theology of care that Jesus called all of us to in his incarnation of *agape* love.

This shocking love

People respond differently to the topic of providing care for others, and there are many good reasons that they do. Our responses to this topic have been shaped and informed by influences such as federal programs, denominational initiatives, personal experiences, religious education and family teachings.

These influences are important for us to recognize so that we can assess with growing maturity what we believe. As Christians, we know there is only one teaching that should guide our thoughts and actions – “Love each other as I have loved you” (John 15:12, NIV) – yet most of us find that this commandment is hard to practice daily.

Jesus was born into a world of various beliefs, philosophies, numerous gods and oppressive legalism, and what Jesus taught was radical and revolutionary. Shocking, even! The world changed when Jesus came into it as the manifestation of *agape* love. *Agape* is a Greek word for love, but Jesus redefined its meaning (see John 3:16) to be “self-giving love” – a giving away of one’s self in love with no thought or expectation, return or recognition. It is God’s love for us as experienced in the life and death and resurrection of his son, Jesus. It forever changed how we are to understand our “neighbor” and our “community.”

Jesus as servant

Perhaps one of Jesus' most astonishing statements to his disciples and us – among many - was when he said, "... the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve" (Matthew 20:28, NIV). Throughout his ministry on earth, Jesus lived out this truth. Consider just a few examples where Jesus placed himself among the despised and discarded of Jewish society to bring comfort, hope and healing:

- Healing lepers
- Dining with tax collectors
- Talking with the Samaritan woman at the well
- Driving demons out of the possessed

In a ritual system that greatly valued purity, Jesus' willingness to interact with the people described here was indeed shocking. No one had seen such self-giving love, certainly not for these "others."

Knowing that Jesus was fully human during his ministry on earth, how did he do it? Jesus' compassion was a natural expression that flowed from his deep relationship to his Father in heaven; it enabled all other relationships. This *agape* love can be described as God's love to us and in us. It is the same love available to us today. Such love is freely given, without regard for status or merit, without regard for return or benefit. It is obedient love responding to the nature of God, not to the nature of the person who receives love. This love – and how it can transform all of our relationships – is Jesus himself.

» Individual reflection

Most of us have heard the story of Jesus washing his disciples' feet (John 13) so many times, we may have lost the impact of how truly extraordinary this action was. Read through this passage of scripture and then quietly reflect on what this meant in that time and place. Try to place yourself in the scene as one of the disciples, hot and weary and covered with dust as you step into the room. Then, write a short letter to a friend describing what you felt when Jesus, your Master and Teacher, knelt before you and washed your feet so that you would know "the full extent of his love" (John 13:1, NIV).

Following the Way

Something happened to those who were cared for by Jesus with such unconditional love. In his presence, the unworthy were deemed worthy, the unvalued were valued, the discarded and forgotten were reclaimed and celebrated. Their lives were transformed. They leapt and ran and shouted the good news to all who would hear.

Following the Narrow Way of Jesus carries with it the mandate to think, live and act differently from the world. As were the first disciples, we are called to a different standard – that of *agape* love. Serving others is no longer something we fit into our lives, it IS our lives. We move from preoccupation with self to sacrificing self because of our relationship with God.

» Class discussion

Write where all can see responses from the class to these questions:

- What do these two phrases used in today's lesson mean to you – "Following the Narrow Way" and to "lose ourselves in the very heart of God?" Restate them in terms more familiar to you.
- Has there been a time in your life when someone expressed *agape* love to you?
- Jesus says that in our loving one another, all will know we are disciples of Christ (John 13:34). What does it mean to consider yourself a disciple of Christ?

We are all one

Neither could any group of people be excluded from this transforming love. Jesus freely gave his love and care to all he met because of his relationship with God. More than that, Jesus went *out of his way* to help others. The message to all people in all ages is this new commandment: that we love one another as God loves us (John 13:31-35). To say we love God and yet not love our neighbor is to not love God. For those who profess Christ as the Risen Lord, the two are now one.

There is another spiritual truth at work in Jesus' teaching. It is that we are all broken in some way and all in need of God's saving grace. In this, too, no one is excluded.

» Context for today

Ask a volunteer to read the following scenario aloud and then discuss the questions following:

People dressed in their Sunday best mill about outside the sanctuary doors before entering for worship. There is laughter as people greet and hug one another. Suddenly, the wailing of a small child outside catches everyone's attention. Several turn to look as a young woman and three small children walk hesitantly through the open church door. Their clothes are wrinkled and worn, one child is coughing, her nose running. Two of the children are crying and pulling away from their mother, finally breaking away to run into the sanctuary. As they do, they run into an elderly man, who stumbles against a pew before catching himself. "I'm sorry," the young woman whispers, her head down, before she hurries to collect her children and seats all of them on a pew toward the back. No one sits beside them.

Moments into the sermon, the children begin arguing loudly and several congregation members turn to stare at the mother, disapproval etched heavily into their faces. But the young woman, who is obviously pregnant, has fallen asleep. Her head sags heavily against the back of the wooden pew.

- Have you experienced a similar situation in your church?
- What happened? What did an usher, staff person or church member do?
- Have you ever been in a situation where you felt like the "stranger"?
- How were you treated? How did that make you feel?

» Silence before God

Read today's focus verses aloud, and then meditate silently on them. Read them to yourself slowly, stopping whenever a word or phrase catches your attention. Underline those words and return to them this week during your devotional time.



Jesus took the command to love our neighbor as we love ourselves, and pushed the definition of who is our neighbor out, out, and still further out, until it reached to the ends of the earth and included all of humanity – all of God's children.

– Alvin Alexi Curri



"Come, then, my beloved souls, let us run and fly to that love which calls us. Why are we waiting? Let us set out at once, lose ourselves in the very heart of God and become intoxicated with his love."

Jean-Pierre de
Caussade

Key points from today's lesson

- Many factors influence our beliefs about caring for others.
- It is important to recognize and re-examine what those influences are.
- We are called to “love one another” with the *agape* love of Jesus as a response to the nature of God, not to the nature of another person.
- There is no longer any division; we are all one in Christ.
- The *agape* love of Christ has the power to transform lives.

» Challenge

Choose from the following options for the coming week:

- Reflect this week on 1 John 4. Use commentaries to inform your study. Journal the thoughts that the Holy Spirit brings to you throughout the week.
- Reflect on how you would explain *agape* love to someone.
- Our lesson talks about groups of people in Jesus' time that lived on the margins of society. Who are such groups in our world? Read current media and note stories that address the situation of these groups. Note what opinions and actions are reported and then compare those to the focus verses in today's lesson.



A sense of oneness

Have you ever tried looking at another person and seeing your own self within him or her? I don't mean projecting onto another person all our miserable traits. I am speaking of recognizing the hidden truth that we are one with all people. We are part of them and they are part of us.

Frederick Buechner spoke of growing to a point where “selfhood, in the sense that you are one self and I am another self, begins to fade. You begin to understand that in some way your deepest self is the self of all - that you are in them and they are in you.” Finding this sense of oneness is a natural part of the intimate journey with God. The more we are one with God, the more we are united with one another. We begin to feel a new and deeper identification with people. We come to see that we are all truly related, that what happens to them happens to us.

– Sue Monk Kidd, *God's Joyful Surprise*

