

# “The Recipe for Living”

Sermon by Reverend James Brassard  
on the occasion of Dee McCarty's Retirement  
Scripture: Matthew 18:21-35 *the Parable of the Unmerciful servant*  
I Peter 4:7-11 *Living for God*  
given at Christian Community Presbyterian Church on  
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I Peter 4:8 “Above all, love each other deeply, because love covers a multitude of sins.”

Love is a subject about which we all know something but . . . none of us know enough.  
To speak about love is to speak about the whole of the Christian gospel, the declaration of which we learned at a very early age when we were taught to say GOD IS LOVE.

Thus every sermon is in some sense a proclamation of love,  
every prayer is a response to love,  
every hymn is a song of love.

Because love is a familiar human experience, we should have little difficulty in understanding the nature of God whom Christians have always described as **love itself**.

“Jesus loves me this I know for the Bible tells me so.”

The better known parables of Jesus express in a powerful way the **stark contrast** between the unconditional love of God and the limited nature of human love.

The loving father welcomes the **prodigal son** home with a big party and a special ring. The son who ran away and squandered the family inheritance gets a hero's welcome from the father whose love never gives up the hope that the son will return. When the Prodigal in desperation returns, the father requires no conditions . . . offers no lectures -- just a warm and tearful embrace—“my son who I thought was dead is now alive.” Meanwhile the older brother who harbors resentment against his younger sibling skips the party . . .

**The Parable of the unmerciful servant.** A high-ranking servant is brought before the master because he owes his master an unfathomable debt. The custom of the time was to throw the debtor into debtors' prison and sell his family members into slavery until the debt was paid.

Incredibly the master forgives the debt completely.

The forgiven man then exits the master's presence with his freedom and future intact. Immediately he is confronted by a man who owes *him* a small debt. The man begs for time to repay it. Displaying none of the love and mercy the master had shown him, the servant orders the man thrown into prison until the debt is repaid.

This parable demonstrates the wide gap between God's love and human love.

*Love is something everyone knows something about . . . but no one knows enough.*

We are all aware of the **great power of love.**

Love unites individuals, love unites people with nature, causes, groups, and even objects.

Love is the moving force of life itself—the drive to unite everything that should be united.

For some the loss of love is the loss of life itself.

LET NONE OF US SUPPOSE THAT LOVE IS EASY TO SUSTAIN.

Its difficulty lies in our **propensity to delight in its many contraries.** The wedding scriptures in I Corinthians 13---which lists the qualities of love---is always offset by the **opposite tendencies** – which we all have experienced.

Love **is** patient and kind---it **is not** jealous or boastful. It **is not** arrogant or rude.

Love **does not** insist in its own way. It is not irritable or resentful. It does not rejoice at wrong but rejoices in the right.

It is interesting to note that the list of **what love is not.... is twice as long** as the list stating what love is.

**Love is an experience that begins with the earliest relationship we have**—between a mother and a child. It gradually expands within a nurturing family to a wider world of true and enduring friendships grounded in the love of each other's character. If we have good experiences inside the family and then initially positive ones outside the home—we readily come to love other people.

Those grounded in love look forward to meeting people and getting to know them.

Often those wounded by lack of love withhold or avoid meeting new people or lack the trust to find intimacy.

On the personal level, love is **always a powerful psychological experience.**

Those who are in love experience a strong attraction to, an intense desire for, a vivid appreciation of, and joyous interest in the loved one. This powerful experience is highly attractive when see it...or even hear about it.

Some of the most memorable **movies are love stories.** We laugh at the memorable words---we often sound ridiculous if we parse them.

I am old enough to remember LOVE STORY with Ali McGraw and Ryan O'Neal.

What a tear jerker!—a young couple falls in love. The freedom and joy that love produces makes even the most challenging moments in life worthwhile. Then the girl gets cancer and dies.

The most enduring phrase from that movie: *“Love means never having to say you are sorry.”*

All wise individuals know that apologizing for inconsiderate actions helps keep relationships strong. Offering repentance and seeking forgiveness are necessary parts of mature relationships.

At the same time—in loving relationships both parties instinctively know when they hurt each other—and since they desire intimacy and harmony—the process of apology and forgiveness is often accomplished without words being exchanged.

More recently, Tom Hanks played a young father whose beloved wife dies of cancer. So distraught was his character at his wife's death that he requires a change in scenery. He leaves Chicago and moves to a lakeside house in Seattle with his 9-year-old son.

At Christmas time the young son is so worried about his Dad's inconsolable grief that he calls a late night nationwide radio program that is hosted by a psychologist who helps people with their relationships. The boy is talking about his father's prolonged grief. The host talks the boy into putting his dad, who is having trouble sleeping, on the phone. Hank's character talks about his deceased wife—how much he loves her.

The radio host asks..."What did you love about her?" Hanks responds instantly, "How much time do you have? It was not one thing but a MILLION LITTLE THINGS."

That night the talk show got 20,000 letters wanting to know the name and address of the caller the host referred to as SLEEPLESS IN SEATTLE. Actress Meg Ryan then goes to great lengths to find this man who can love so completely and openly.

### **Love is the most powerful force in the world.**

The power to affirm the other, to forgive the other, to become reconciled with the other . . . to be able to support and encourage the other--- is a life giving force.

Dee McCarty's greatest gift to this church for many years was to embody the constant love Peter writes about . . . Dee has always been present to listen to one's hurts or to acknowledge one's doubts. Dee has the gift of convincing . . . even the most downhearted . . . that God is working for good in their lives.

Dee modeled in word and deed the great commandment of Jesus.

*"You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind . . . and you shall love your neighbor as yourself."*

During the **divisive moments** in our congregation's history, Dee reached out to those who may have felt rejected or left out of the church's fellowship. Her ability to love constantly indeed helped cover "a multitude of this church's sins of omission and commission."

That is a strange phrase Peter uses: "**Love covers a multitude of sins.**"

British commentator Barclay suggests that Peter might mean several things.

#### **1. If you love deeply you can overlook other people's sins.**

Ali McGraw meant to say . . . love means never having to say you are sorry.

It does not mean that if you are deeply loved you have the license to take advantage of someone's predisposition to overlook sins. Peter and the early church had no tolerance for spouses who were unfaithful to their wedding vows..

I believe that if you love deeply you can tolerate some of the annoying habits and idiosyncrasies the other person has. In all strong friendships there is this tolerance for some weirdness in each party. You might not understand why they do these strange things—but if you love deeply . . . you can overlook those quirks that make each of us a unique child of God.

*... love each other deeply, for love covers a multitude of sins.*

2. I think if you love deeply—you find it easy to **like people**..  
I noticed that Dee has a quality that I admired in my Father.  
I suspect it is essential in being a joyful follower of Jesus.

Dee always sees the best in people . . .

### Folks, **Dee really likes all of you.**

When I first got here---I was talking to someone I had just met—and I asked Dee for some background on that person. She instantly launched into a **resume of that person's gifts and talents**. She knew the contributions that person had made to the church or community. Whether the gifts were that of a good teacher...wonderful parent, great coach, talented artist—an inspired musician...passion for mission...she just lifted it up!

Dee knows and loves all of you!

I believe that at the heart of love is an **instinct** that sees and affirms the best in people.  
When we are not right—love can help us return to wholeness.

### **God's love is the sustainer of the Christian faith.**

The call to be a follower of Jesus is to live under the spirit of love. The constant love is intended to move beyond the immediate family and one's circle of friends. Christian love has the power to unite people and to restore the brokenness of our world.

Since I must plan my vacations a long time in advance in order to arrange guest preachers, when I encounter the prospect of bad weather I tend to go anyway. Several years ago I planned a camping trip with some friends on Cape Cod for the Labor Day weekend. We knew we were in trouble as we headed up the Cape and everyone else was leaving. The predicted Nor'easter came in with a vengeance . . . with heavy rains and strong winds. We stuck it out most of the night but in the wee hours we packed up and headed south.

We ended up finding a hotel in Mystic, Connecticut . . . an old seaport with a village where they recreated the days when whaling ships sailed in and out of that town. Before the discovery of oil in Pennsylvania, the source of oil for lamps was whale oil. A whaling ship would go out for 3 and 4 year voyages.

Up to 40 whaling ships were wrecked each month around the world—with a terrible loss of life. Many families were losing most of the men to the sea.

During one treacherous storm in the early 1900's a group of Mystic residents gathered to watch a ship that wrecked just off the coast. The town soon arranged a lifeboat rescue—which was successful all but for one sailor who was slightly out of reach. There being no room left on the lifeboat, he was left in the water. The rescue worker told him to hang onto the piece of wood that was barely keeping him afloat—promising that they would send someone back.

The storm was so fierce it took a long time to get back to shore. Then the **storm got worse**. One guy said he would go back out for the remaining sailor—and **pleaded** for a brave assistant.  
“Who will come with me?”

A young man stepped forward, **“I’ll go.”**

His mother immediately began an impassioned pleading,

“Don't go John. You are all I have left. Your father drowned at sea...your brother **William** sailed away and has not been heard from since . . . if you are lost I'll be left alone.”

John listened to his mother's pleading. Then he simply said, **“MOM, I have to go...it's my duty.**

They all watched as the lifeboat fought its way to the wreck. John's mother was anxiously weeping and praying. After what seemed like an eternity—through the thick coastal fog they noticed the lifeboat started back, fighting the angry waves.

When it got close enough they yelled out, **DID YOU GET HIM?”**

John shouted back---**Yes, and tell Mom it's William.”**

God's powerful and risk-taking love is the sustenance of the Christian life.

Few memory verses better express the essence of what Jesus taught and lived...than 1 Peter 4:8

*“Above all, love each other deeply.... for love covers a multitude of sins.”*