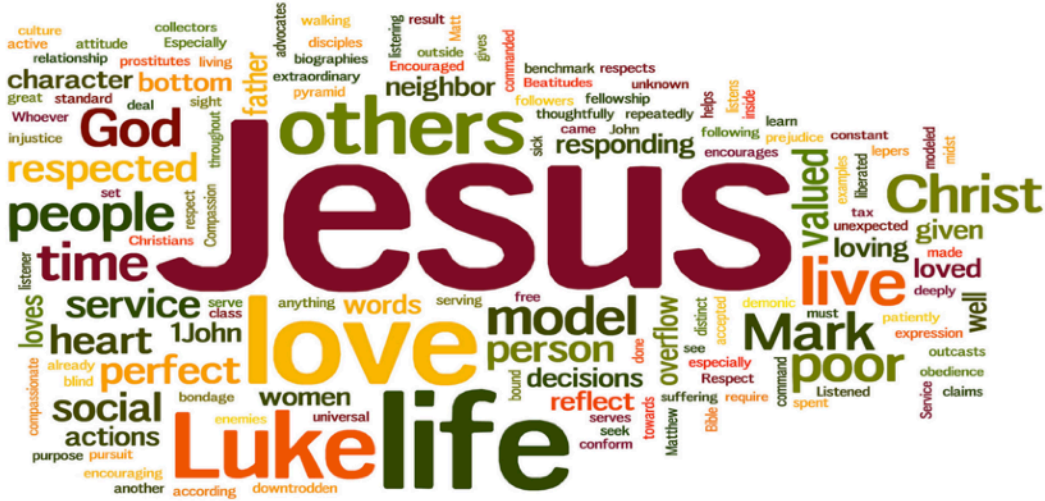


# As I Have Loved You

**Sermon • Rev'd John Shoaf • 18 May 2025**

Acts 11:1-18 • John 13:31-35



May the words of my mouth and the thoughts of our hearts give glory to you, O Lord. Amen.

You have often heard me speak of the two greatest commandments. The first is to love the Lord your God with all your heart and soul and mind and strength, and nothing is more important. Why? Simple answer: because God loves us. God loves us so much that he created us for his pleasure, and sent his Son to us to save us from the trouble we had fallen into, the trouble that comes from trusting to our own knowledge and abilities and not to God's. I had a realisation about that the other day. I tend to think, and I'm sure I'm not the only one, that I'm right most of the time (my wife will attest to this). Before I became a Christian, before I accepted Jesus as my Saviour, I had a pretty high opinion of myself. But now that I have come to know God, I know that *God* is right all the time. So obviously, I can't be. To know God is to know humility. To know God is to be able to rest in God's wisdom and know that God's ways are the best. To know God and to listen for God's guidance is to be assured that I am following the right path, and there is no need for worry.

The second great commandment is to love your neighbour as yourself. The parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25-37) helps to answer a big question:

who is our neighbour? It is not just the families who live next door to us; it is not just the person in the next desk to us at school or at work. All men and women are our neighbours, in God's sight. And we receive another big lesson in today's reading from the Acts of the Apostles.

The reading concerns a vision which comes to Peter as he is praying. Visions are rare, but they are one way in which God may communicate with us. A vision may be no more than a new thought which comes to you, when you don't know where it came from. When we say, "It just occurred to me that ...", we should thank God for the new thought. Perhaps the new thought really grabs you, because it's so real. You can see it before you. That is a kind of vision. And I think visualisation is useful in prayer. When I pray for our churches to be filled with joyous worshippers, I picture that in my mind. I visualise the pews all filled with smiling people. Now that is a picture I create in my mind, but certainly God can put a picture in my mind as well. And that is what happened to Peter.

Peter saw something like a large sheet being lowered by its four corners from above, and in the sheet were all kinds of animals — mammals, reptiles, and birds. As he told the people around him:

Then I heard a voice saying to me, 'Get up, Peter; kill and eat!' But I said, 'Certainly not, Lord! No ritually unclean or defiled food has ever entered my mouth.'  
(Acts 11:7-8)

Peter was thinking of all the rules which Jews have traditionally followed about how certain animals may be eaten, and others may not. Some are "clean" — the ones which may be eaten — and the rest are "unclean." These rules are followed by observant Jews to this day.

But the voice replied, "Do not consider anything [to be] unclean, which God has considered clean" (11:9) This was huge for Peter, because the Jewish people were used to following all those strict rules or laws given them through the Bible from God. Those laws included what they could eat and what they couldn't, but also rules on family relations, festivals and worship, sexual matters, etc. The laws served two purposes: first, by obeying them, Jews showed their faith in God; second, they set themselves apart from all the tribes around them. God's chosen people had to behave in different ways, in order to show that identity. But now, God is telling Peter that he can eat what he wants! This was surely unsettling to him and the other Jews.

So God was doing a new thing. And when some men arrive with a message to come to see the centurion, he goes with them, even though the centurion is not a Jew. When Peter preaches to him and his family about Jesus Christ, the Holy Spirit comes down upon them, just as happened to the Jews. God is not just the God of Israel, but of all people. Peter and his fellow Jews are amazed, and no

doubt it took them a little while to get used to this new idea, that the salvation through Jesus is for all people. Sometimes it's hard to keep up with God. As I read the other day:

Faith, when it comes down to it, is our often breathless attempt to keep up with the redemptive activity of God, to keep asking ourselves, "What is God doing, where on earth is God going now?"<sup>1</sup>

God is certainly doing new things in this diocese and in this parish. This evening at St Mary's, we will debut a new service, put together and run by Marco and our Dominos youth. It will be a service of music and prayer, and Marco will give us a message. I hope you'll all come to support it. Dominos hope to make it a monthly service.

And a group of us are also working on a new second service at All Saints, which we hope will attract some of the many new families who have moved into the Prebbleton area. This is an opportunity for growth in our parish, and growth means that we are reaching more of God's people. These new initiatives, like anything we do, must be the product of much prayer, so that we may determine as well as we can what God wants us to do. And through my prayer and that of others, I believe God wants us to step forward in faith, in order to bring more people to know the great blessing of God's love.

Peter faced a new situation as God revealed to him and the other disciples that salvation would come not only to the Jews, but to the Gentiles (the non-Jews) as well. This changed their mission, and it led to Paul being sent to distant nations to spread the Gospel among the Gentiles, while Peter focussed more on the Jews. Just as Peter and Paul adapted to the new message from God, so we too must adapt to the changing society around us, a society in which fewer and fewer people turn to God. Those who do worship now look for something different in a church service. We must develop services which reach people where they are, in language and music that resonates spiritually with them.

One thing that doesn't change, that will never change, is the love of God and the promise he holds out to us of eternal life. Whatever we do, the main focus of every service will be proclaiming the Gospel and showing God's love. If we don't do that, we have no reason to exist as a church. We will continue to show the world that we are Christ's disciples — as Jesus says,

As I have loved you, so you must love one another. If you have love for one another, then everyone will know that you are my disciples.

(John 13:34-35)

Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> Willimon, William H., *Acts: Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching*. Kindle Edition, p99.