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United church of Christ
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Ripples of Love

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John 15: 9-17

One of my favorite pastimes is skipping rocks on water. I'm okay at it; I've known some great rock skippers though.

I also enjoy a great rock throwing target competition. Knocking a can off atop a fencepost from twenty yards away is strangely satisfying.

When I was younger we termed such rock throwing contests as "chucking rocks," as in, "Do you want to go and chuck some rocks?" As a kid, I also enjoyed picking up big rocks and heaving them, into water to make big splashes.

Who doesn't like the fun of making a big ole splash?

Invariably, at some point in life we pause and wonder what our legacy in life will be; what stories will people tell about us? What memories of us will last?

What splashes in life, love and faith will we be remembered for?

The bulk of our recent lectionary passages come from Johannine passages (The Gospel of John and letters of John). And, the central crux of the Johannine theology is God's love manifested in our daily lives and relationships (1 Jn 3 & 4 and Jn 15). And, it seems that love is a legacy that we should strive for.

Sometimes a lot of attention on "love" in the gospel of John, and the letters attributed to John, centers around the Greek term, "agape"; commentators sometimes describe the range of different Greek terms for various categories of love (family, friendship, intimacy, sexual, etc.)

A point often missed is that "agape" in the way John used it (within a Hebraic and Aramaic mindset), is not a category or limited experience of love— but agape is a spirit of love that encompasses the many diverse experiences of love (family, friendships, intimacy, to even simple acts of kindness). To this point, Dale Moody (one of my favorite Johannine exegetes) adds, "Divine love (agape) embraces all of these lower levels of love, but it is more. It is spontaneous, self-[giving] love that gives ultimate meaning to all other loves."

It's a bit ironic that such love was associated with the apostle of John. If you recall, John and his brother James were remembered somewhat as hotheads earning the nickname of "sons of thunder" (Mk 3.17); the "sons of thunder" even advocated for fire from heaven to rain down on Samaritans that were reluctant to embrace Jesus (Lk 9. 51-54). So, for the Johannine community to eventually advocate for love must of meant that the early community of faith evolved over time in more gracious ways in their understanding of God and faith.

The fact that God in grace leaves room for us to grow in love is good news. But, that means we have to learn to choose and show love.

The good thing about leaving a legacy of love is that even small acts of kindness and compassion can make a meaningful impact-- make a big ole splash.

Jason Witten, one of my favorite athletes, retired this past week after 15 years of professional football. In his speech he thanked many positive influences in his life and career— teammates, coaches, family members and community. Near the end of his speech he summed up a general theme that he felt true as he reflected upon concluding a particular meaningful part of his life (a quote original to Maya Angelou):

“If I’ve learned anything along the way in the last 15 years, it’s that people will forget what you said, people will forget what you did, but people won’t forget how you made them feel.”

Last year I took a small outing to Kings Canyon to do some lite hiking and nature bathing. I scrambled ever so carefully down to watch the water flowing in King’s river. I found a nice smooth granite boulder to climbed up on and sprawled out across, like a lizard sunbathing. I sat there motionless watching a collection of river water pooling off to in relatively calm and placid manner.

I started looking for rocks to toss into the center of the calm and staid pool of water. I tossed underhanded so that the rocks went up high and descended fast into the center of the war and rippled outward. I experimented with different sizes and shapes of rocks and watched them plop into the water and create a radiating ripple outward.

Eventually, I was curious how far even the littlest of rocks, tiny flecks of scree, would ripple out. It turns out, that even a small speck of scree tossed into a pool of water will ripple outward far and wide.

At this point in my faith journey, I’m increasingly aware of how kindness, in small and everyday ways, is some of the most effective repentance and meaningful ways of life that I live out my faith— many times it’s not the grand noble thing that we do, it’s the small acts of kind love we show along the way of our life journey.

A few years ago (ok, it’s been several years ago now), the singer songwriter Jewel sang, *“In the end, only kindness matters.”* I believe that to be true in faith. Kindness is the best repentance. And kindness is no small deed, or shy quality, nor is it cowardly or easily intimidated. Jesus was lovingly kind; Jesus also boldly gave his whole life away to confront systems of cruel power and exploitation-- *“No one has greater love than this, to lay down one’s life for one’s friends.”*

And isn’t this the summation of Jesus teaching? That in both significant and small ways, and in all that we do and experience, remember what Jesus taught and commanded:

“This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you . . . I am giving you these commands so that you may love one another.”