In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Valentine’s Day was this past week. That good day was Thursday — a few days ago. It has left me in the mood to preach a sermon on love, sweet love. As the song goes, “It’s the only thing that there’s just too little of.”¹ And that is the truth. In our world, there is a lot of love, but not enough. We could use some more, in my opinion.

My Bible text for this sermon comes from Galatians Chapter 5. This text is not from our assigned Bible Lessons for today. Still, I believe this brief passage from St. Paul is an honorable response to our assigned Bible Lessons. St. Paul speaks of love and connects it with the Holy Spirit. His words go this way:

²²But the fruit of the Spirit is love...

That is the first item in the Apostle’s list of fruits of the Spirit. He continues his list with other good things:

²²But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, ²³gentleness, self-control; against such there is no law. (Galatians 5:22-23, RSV)

There are two ways of life in this world. Our assigned Bible Lessons are full of that theme — two ways of life. There is a life that is grounded and rests in God. The fruit of that kind of a life is love, joy, peace, patience, and kindness. There is no valid law against such things because that is the way God wants things to be. He wants more love and kindness on earth. The other way of life is a life that does not rest in God but rather in ourselves and our convictions about what is good and true and lovely. The problem with this way of life is that we might be wrong. Or we might just get worn out and no longer much care about what is good and true and lovely. So, two problems: Our convictions about things might be wrong and out of sync with God, reality, and eternity, or we might become weary with the whole matter and settle for some good state of ourselves. That is, we can become tired and settle for selfishness.

Before we dive into these matters, let me tell you about my childhood pastor and his wife. It is still near Valentine’s Day. Let me tell you of my dear, old pastor and his wife and of their love. My pastor was named Rev. H.D. Dukes and his wife was Mabel. We called her Sister Mabel, and she was my Sunday School teacher. I do not mean my Sunday School teacher when I was a little child. Rather she was the Sunday school teacher for the grown-ups. I lobbied to join that class as soon as I could. I raced there. Sister Mabel was one of my favorite teachers ever. She helped introduce me to Jesus. She taught me about Jesus and his love. And she taught me to love the Bible.

Let me pause for a moment to say a word about studying the Bible. Sister Mable Dukes was not ordained, nor did she have a degree in theology, as far as I know. But she loved the Bible and like to gather people around her to read it and discuss it. Here at Immanuel, I still think back with gratitude to our Monday Evening Bible Class, when I began serving here at Immanuel. The class was taught by former member Barbara Zelenko. To prepare for each class, I think Barbara read for a classic, lovely, series of commentaries called “Barkley Commentaries.” But chiefly she simply led the class in reading and discussing the Bible. I am confident that some of you could do that too. You could lead a Bible Study either here at Immanuel or in your home or someone else’s home. Let Bible Classes multiply!

Rev. and Mrs. H.D. and Mabel Dukes

Back to my childhood pastor. In this morning’s worship folder, I have included a photo of Rev. and Mrs. Dukes from back in 1969, when they were having supper with us at our home near Denton, on the Eastern Shore of
Maryland. Rev. Dukes had been a waterman when he was young. He grew up on one of those islands in the Chesapeake Bay, off the Eastern Shore. He knew about oysters and crabs and pots and boats and the smell of salt in the air from Bay. He was a faithful pastor, rather elderly, with beautiful white hair and a gentle manner.

Now, here is why I am thinking of them on Valentine’s Day. Ever once in a while, Rev. Dukes and Sister Mabel would sing a duet for us in church. They were not great singers, but that was a small matter to us sitting there in the pews. They sang as best they could, standing there side-by-side, singing some old hymn of praise of God. Sister Sarah Jacobs played the piano for them. This singing was all about love. It was about love between a husband and wife, and it was about the love of God which they trusted and preached and rested in all their lives. Even for a teenage boy like me sitting in the pews, I thought that this was one of the most romantic things ever. Maybe Pastor Caleb and Lynnae can sing a hymn like that for us one day. They are worthy successors to Rev. and Mrs. Dukes.

Now, there is a lot of love in our world. You do not need to love Jesus in order to love your husband or wife or children or neighbors. Deep in the hearts of all humanity I think we can find love—both the desire to be loved and the desire to love and to live in a world like that, a good world, with lots of love.

So, you do not need to be a Christian in order to be a person of love. Still, being a Christian has this advantage and this promise:

22But the fruit of the Spirit is love... (Galatians 5)

This is inevitable. Things must work out this way if we live in Christ. If we be honest Christians, we are going to resemble Jesus more and more as we go on. And if we do that, we are going to grow in love. As we become older, we should not become crochety, but rather more gentle and more kind to people.

Two of our Bible Lessons for this Sunday speak of this idea. Both our Jeremiah reading and our Psalm speak of being planted. They speak of what we are resting in, what we are building on. Jeremiah puts the point this way:

7Blessed is the man [blessed is the woman] who trusts in the LORD, whose trust is the LORD.
8He is like a tree planted by water, that sends out its roots by the stream, and does not fear when heat comes, for its leaves remain green, and is not anxious in the year of drought, for it does not cease to bear fruit.
And then our Psalm for this Sunday - Psalm 1 - says this:

1 Happy are they who have not walked in the counsel of the wicked, nor lingered in the way of sinners, nor sat in the seats of the scornful!
2 Their delight is in the law of the LORD, and they meditate on his law day and night.
3 They are like trees planted by streams of water, bearing fruit in due season, with leaves that do not wither; everything they do shall prosper. (Psalm 1, LBW)

Think of some big old oak tree, standing strong in the meadow near a stream. Winds buffet it, seasons of drought come along, winters can be fierce, but that old tree stands there. You can sit in its shade in the summertime and read a book. It is still there, though the season might be dry and the rains lacking. It is still there, still strong, because its roots go down and draw water from the stream. It is a strong, stable old tree.

That is how Christians should be. That is how you and I should be. We should be rooted in Christ. Hot winds of temptation might blow on us, cold winds of hostility or enmity might buffet us, we might suffer seasons of spiritual drought when there seems to be little good news in sight, but we should still be standing there, still inclined toward love and kindness. Like some big old oak tree planted near a stream, the foundations of our lives should stretch deep into Jesus Christ. We should permit ourselves to enjoy his love, and we should love our neighbors in turn.

This past Sunday, we ended that magnificent ordination liturgy for Pastor Caleb with Luther’s great hymn, A Mighty Fortress Is Our God. Think of the holy defiance we find in the last few lines of that hymn:

Were they to take our house, goods, honor, child, or spouse, though life be wrenched away, they cannot win the day. The kingdom’s ours forever!

Our Choir and Congregation were singing, the clergy were joining in with strong voices, Pastor Jim Miller was playing his trumpet in his gorgeous way, and we were all thinking of Jesus — feeling brave in the protection of his love. That is what I mean by being planted like a tree near a stream, flourishing and enjoying the love of Jesus toward us.

And then St. Paul comes along and says, “Now, turn to your neighbors, even your crummy neighbors, and love them. Because the fruit of the Spirit is love, patience, kindness...” Let such good traits grow in us as we grow in the
image of Jesus, to whom belongs the glory, with the Father and the Holy Spirit now and forever. Amen.