

Well, it's here. My last Sunday with you wonderful humans. There is an entire chance I will cry this morning, and we're all just going to ignore that if it happens. Feelings are healthy and good... We're just not going to focus on MY feelings this morning. On board? Perfect.

This week is also the first week of the next sermon series to carry yall through the next month and a half. This series is one near and dear to the hearts of this community and to the church leadership. These are the 7 Hills Worth Dying On. Now, I didn't get this week just to have a lowball pitch on my last week... though it definitely worked out in my favor here. This happens to be a Hill that I so deeply believe in, and that I know Copper Creek does SO well.

This morning, we're talking about our First Hill to Die on, Loving.

First, acknowledge the elephant in the room. It is strange to preach a goodbye sermon, and it is really weird to sit for a week writing a goodbye sermon while you're also packing your office, getting coffee with people, getting dinner with youth, and saying goodbye to different people and experiences. However, that is made a bit easier when you're preaching on love, and loving everyone who walks into this church. If you've been around a while, you'll know that I kind of have two "things". One- let's do it! As we move from getting here, to being here- take a moment to center yourself. Take a deep breath. Nice. It's actually required (by law) that yall continue that. I didn't make the rules. My second thing- when I give the benediction, I say "As you go from this place, go out in joy, be led forth in peace, and walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you've been called." When I sat and thought about this sermon, and how to preach a goodbye sermon on loving, I was reminded of those two things. Starting well, and ending well. Today, it feels right to preach on the benediction. A blessing as we leave.

Isaiah 55:12

For you shall go out in joy
and be led forth with peace;
the mountains and the hills before you
shall burst into song,
and all the trees of the field shall clap their hands.

Ephesians 4:1-6

4 I, therefore, the prisoner in the Lord, beg you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called, **2** with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, **3** making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace: **4** there is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope of your calling, **5** one Lord, one faith, one baptism, **6** one God and Father of all, who is above all and through all and in all.

In the letter to the Ephesians, the author shares with us some of the gifts that are needed in the church and tells the Ephesians that above all is the bond of peace and love holding them together to be the Church. We also have the ability to use these gifts and talents throughout our lives to complete the greater, God-given calls we have all been gifted. We can, and should, use these gifts to grow the church and our community and be the body of Christ in the world today.

In the Isaiah passage, the speaker is having a conversation with God. The context around this passage is that God's word isn't supposed to return to God without doing the work it was meant to do. God sends things out in Joy, to go forward in peace. There is celebration the whole way, even the mountains and the trees are celebrating. An absolutely beautiful image.

So, where do these come together and relate to this awesome church being loving?

To be the body of Christ, like the Ephesians passage is talking about, I truly believe we must be loving, graceful, and welcoming people. There is no way to be the body of Christ without these traits. Just as our Ephesians passage says, there is ONE body, there is ONE Spirit, ONE baptism. This one-ness connects us all. It seems incredibly freeing to spend our time demonstrating God to others in the spirit of love because God already exists as Love.

Being that God is sending us each out into the world to represent the Creator and Christ to humans, we can trust that God is sending us for a reason. Copper Creek is pretty clear for that reason. It is shown in these 7 hills to die on. And one of those is loving other people.

Lately, we've been hearing a lot about the love of God and humanity in the news. People discuss God's wrath, or if people should love other humans better. Maybe you've heard that this person loves God more because they did this. Or that person hates people and doesn't know God, because they did that. Or even a politician is right because they believe in loving only these

people, or those ideals... It is hard to not make the connections when people of faith, and faith leaders especially are screaming about the groups of people that are wrong or need to be “fixed” or deserve to be shunned from the Church. When that is all that is on the news, and people are fighting so loudly against love and faithfully loving other people- it is difficult to see any other side. Here’s the other side though-

In the Manifesto, on the page of Loving, you’ll see this passage:

Loving every single person.

Loving unconditionally.

Loving all the time.

Loving no matter what.

One thing that drew me to Copper Creek, and I believe drew a lot of y’all to Copper Creek, is this first hill. This community is a beautiful one that is built on loving each other unconditionally, all the time, no matter what. You love people like family. The family of this church and the family of the body of Christ. Sounds easy right? Raise your hand if you have siblings. Or chosen family that you count as siblings.

Alright. I know that this is going to be a sticky point for yall. Did you ever look at that person and say “wow. I really don’t like you. I do love you. I really don’t like you.”? Anyone else? Cause I STILL say that to my siblings. I actually think one of the best things about growing up is that now, my siblings and I DO like each other most of the time. And when we don’t, we just don’t have to answer their text right then. Mom and Dad always said, “You don’t have to like each other- but you do have to love each other.”

The point in these family settings, yes even if that is chosen family, is that you KNOW that love will be there, unconditionally, all the time, no matter what. Even on the worst days. Even when you don’t like the other family members. Even when everything is going horribly wrong and you just need to crawl into a cave for a few days... you know the love is there. Those people are there.

Unfortunately, I know a lot of people here have dealt with those people NOT being there. So many people here have heard “I love you, but...” Have you ever thought about that word? But? It kinda negates everything immediately before it. If I tell you “I love you but you’re really annoying.” or “You’re perfect, but I can’t stand when you do this.” You’re really just hearing the

second half of those sentences. You're really annoying. I can't stand it when you do this. Those things are awful to hear!

If someone is saying "I love you, but you're not welcome here." Or even "I love you, but your best friend can't serve on a leadership team with you." Guess what- you're not actually being loved. Hang out with cooler humans. Hang out here! I know you know this, I mean- you're here for a reason right?!? And maybe this is your first time here- in which case- hi. If this is your first time, think about why you walked in. Actually, everyone real quick, think about a time that you have been the new person in a situation. This could be a new job, it could have been meeting a new friend, it could have even been when you walked through these doors for the first time. Why did you stay? What made you feel welcome? All anyone wants in a new, changing, or old, familiar situation is to be loved, welcomed, and given grace. That is what we are called to do by these passages, by Christ, and by the values of this church.

Loving people isn't always easy. I know that.

Sometimes, people smell weird. Or people look different than you. Or someone who has a Kia Soul did something really mean once, so you can't ever love anyone who drives a Kia Soul. Fill in that blank with anything that feels a little sticky. You'll know what I am talking about.

Because here's the thing- it's really easy to love the people in this room. Even when one of them is leaving and it feels like a really sad thing... obviously not from experience. Loving the people who are already here is easy. We know that we have this in common. We know there is a common thread binding us all.

Are you ready for the even harder part about loving people?! We are called to go out in Joy. To celebrate going out and loving other people. To celebrate bringing that love of God to every single person we meet. Being led by the peace that God has granted us. Go out with Joy, and be led forth with Peace. It isn't supposed to be easy. Let that joy and peace change the way that you love people. Let God know that you're listening and loving people in a way that is astounding to everyone else.

I was talking to someone this week, and I am not going to name them because I forgot to ask before using this story, but we were talking about how to have safe conversations with people who believe different things than us, and how best to love them and communities different than ours. We were working through the process of what that would look like and if

loving people sometimes had to look like walking away to keep yourself or others safe. And the answer is Love people by keeping yourself safe. If you are unsafe, or your family isn't safe in a situation or conversation, sometimes loving someone else means taking a step back and knowing that God will continue to work through other people to love that human. Luckily, we're not asked to do it alone. Just to Love people unconditionally, all the time, no matter what. There will be other people along the road to love people unconditionally, all the time, no matter what.

So, what does it mean to love someone when it *is* a safe conversation? When the other side of the conversation or relationship believes entirely differently than us? It involves a lot of listening. It involves a lot of give and take. It may involve not really liking the other person sometimes. And it involves allowing that love to be what they see, the love given to us by God, not humanity. It means walking in a manner worthy of the calling God has put on our lives. That call is to love each other. Remember? When Jesus was being tested by a kinda nosey expert in the law (which really meant a religious leader- pastors are the worst.) The expert asked Jesus in Matthew 22: "Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?" **37** Jesus said to him, " 'You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.' **38** This is the greatest and first commandment. **39** And a second is like it: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' Alright yall. There it is- Love God with absolutely everything you have. And while you're loving God with everything you have, love everyone else just as much as you love yourself.

Sometimes this is harder than other times. The fact of the matter is, when we love God, we are loving the Creator of all things, we are loving Jesus who redeemed us regardless of the fact that humanity is a little bit the worst sometimes, and we are loving the Spirit who keeps us connected to God and reminds us that there is connection and wonder in this world and that connection is through each of us. Can you see where this is going? God created each of us, saved each of us, and connects each of us.

Loving God IS loving other people. That is the call on our lives. Love God. Love other people. Love God by loving other people.

Of the hills to die on, this is a pretty great one. Jesus proclaimed that loving God and each other were the two greatest commandments. Paul got it right in Corinthians, "So now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; but the greatest of these is love." If you're going to die on a hill, may as

well make it one that God is pointing to pretty clearly. Loving each other. It is the call we are called to. It is what our greatest purpose is.

Loving every single person.

Loving unconditionally.

Loving all the time.

Loving no matter what.

Please pray with me, this prayer will end in the Lord's Prayer, and that will be up on the screen, but feel free to use the words and language that is closest to your heart. It's all beautiful to God.

Loving God, we stand in awe of you. You never leave us, you send us out in joy, you lead us back in peace, and you call us to love each other. We ask that you lead our walks forward. We ask that you keep us close as we move forward. God, we ask that you keep your hand on this ministry as it changes and shifts in the future. Continue to show us the people who need your love more and more. Give us the words to say and the hearts to care for your people.

We ask this and what is in our hearts in Jesus's name, who taught us to pray,
Our Father who is in heaven, hallowed be your name.

Your kingdom come Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven.

Give us this day our daily bread and forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors.

And lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil.

For yours is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever. Amen.