

Let's cut straight to the chase. John tells us in verse 11 that "We should love one another".

To love one another is a repeated theme and a recurring command throughout the New Testament. John in particular repeats over and over again the command to love throughout his gospel and letters. Indeed, the only logical conclusion you can make is that loving one another isn't just important but absolutely essential to be a follower of Christ.

But let me be clear on one point: our love for others flows from God's love for us. God loved us first. And not for the first time let me repeat the mantra I hold dear...God loved us first and there is no better response than to learn to live loved.

Indeed, it is a given tenet of our Christian faith that God's love for us is so deep and unconditional that he sacrificed his only Son so that everyone who believes in him will be forgiven and have ever lasting life. Or as our psalm reading puts it: "surely goodness and love will follow me all the days of my life, and I will dwell in the house of the Lord for ever".

However, as we have discovered, learning to live loved is not easy, particularly when the reality is that the world is not very loving, as John reminds us through the story of Cain and Abel. These were the oldest two sons of Adam and Eve. They were the very first humans to be born. They were brothers. Yet, Cain, driven by a lack of love kills his brother. The message is clear: don't be like Cain, be like Jesus.

Our love for other people is built solely on the fact that we've been changed by the deep, wide, powerful love of Jesus Christ. And as we've said time and again here in this church, true love is not expressed in words, but in actions. We strive to share God's love in all we do. I don't need to spell out all the different ways we show our love for others, day in and day out. We walk the walk, not just talk the talk and I'm so grateful to be part of a church where loving others is so prominent.

It is through such ways that the presence of God's love in our corporate Church lives is revealed. But just a few verses on from where our reading stopped, John writes these words: "God is love, and those who live in love live in God and God lives in them"

Words that I always say early on in a wedding to remind everyone it is God's purpose that the happy couple are giving themselves to each other in love and it is love that will sustain them as they grow into their marriage. This is what gives a Christian marriage its distinctiveness – that the union mirrors the sacrificial love between Christ and the Church, turning the relationship into a spiritual partnership centred on mutual growth and faith.

Shortly we shall be offering a special blessing for the 50 years and 2 days of Lyndsey and Ian's marriage. According to Mr Google, that is nearly 15 years longer than the average UK marriage lasts before divorce or death intervenes. The same article I read also informed that the secret to a 50+ year marriage isn't a single magic trick, but rather a combination of deep, unwavering commitment and daily maintenance.

On the face of it, that doesn't sound much like love, but then didn't Christ's love reveal unconditional grace, forgiveness, and selflessness as well as large chunks of kindness, compassion, generosity, and patience? Those different aspects of Christ like love I'm sure would have helped during the testing times as well as the good times of a 50 year marriage,

because we all inevitably go through times of adversity, be it work, health, financial or family difficulties.

And to have successfully come through such times the marriage would have required an active effort from both partners whether that be in communication, compromise or responsibilities. De facto walking the walk together as a team whilst allowing each other to grow and evolve over five decades, rather than trying to change one another.

That sounds to me more like the practical outworking of love in marriages moulded within today's turbulent world rather than sticking to the advice once offered to me – knowing and repeatedly saying the most important 6 words in married life – “I'm sorry darling. You are right”. So well done and congratulations to you Ian and Lyndsey and all you others who have celebrated the big 5 - 0 together.

But at the same time, let's not forget those who are left alone because their marriage fails or failed to reach 50 years whether that be as a result of death or divorce. If we haven't experienced it for ourselves, we will almost certainly know of a very close friend or family member who has done so.

For those, let me offer one last insight from John's letter. Verse 20: “God is greater than our hearts and he knows everything”. So do not condemn yourself because God's compassion and grace extends far deeper than our own self-doubt or sense of failure.

Regardless of our circumstances we can take heart from knowing that God's commands are never burdensome. Indeed, Jesus says “come to me, all who are weary and burdened and I will give you rest”. If we do, we can prepare the way to free ourselves from carrying past resentment, anger or bitterness through intentional forgiveness facilitated by Jesus's love and grace.

My prayer is that regardless of who you are, single or married, may the Lord always be with you as you continue to learn to live loved. Amen

Revd. Terry Ward-Hall, 14 June 2026