

# Towson Presbyterian Church

May 6, 2018

Rev. Joel Strom

1 John 5: 1-6 and John 15: 9-17

*“Both Sides of It”*

Are there any Joni Mitchell fans out there? I discovered Joni Mitchell about 15 years ago. For those that do not know of her, Joni is a Canadian singer-songwriter, whose career began in the late 60s and really took off in the 70s, and who is still going strong today. Her music might be best described as folk, but she also dips into pop and rock, and definitely jazz.

I discovered her when I first heard the song *Both Sides Now* – and the version of it that came out in the year 2000. Usually when I listen to a song or an album that I like for the first time, I need to hear it a second listen before I can say, *“Oooo...I will be listening to that for a long time.”*

But *Both Sides Now* had me, completely, the first time I heard it. It was the combination of the lyrics and the accompanying orchestra that just moved me – it grabbed me. You ever have those songs that just get their talons in you immediately? This was one of those for me.

The lyrics to *Both Sides Now* describe someone who after living life for a period of time, they now see life from a different vantage point from when they were younger. Life was maybe more simple back then, and black and white.

*Both Sides Now* begins by talking about clouds, and how she used to see clouds as ice cream castles in the air and feather canyons that were everywhere – she saw the beauty in them - but now she sees them in a different way – *now clouds can also block the sun, and they rain and they snow on everyone.* There are two sides to clouds.

*Both Sides Now* goes on to describe the way she used to see...love. She describes it as *“the dizzy dancing way that you feel, or as every fairy tale comes real.”* She describes love as an emotion. She says, *“I’ve looked at love that way.”* And then the lyrics shift back to the chorus: *“I’ve looked at love from both sides now, from give and take and still somehow, it’s loves illusions that I recall, I really don’t know love at all.”*

You can hear the joy that she has experienced in being caught up in love, but also the pain that can come from giving yourself to love. From clouds to love, *Both Sides Now* ends *“I really don’t know life at all...”*

I was living in New Jersey when I discovered this song, and I was having a conversation with one of my co-workers, Beth, and somehow Joni Mitchell came up, and I told her that had I recently heard *Both Sides Now*. And Beth smiled at me and said, *“Did you hear the late 60s version or the new version?”*

*“Wait, what, there are two versions?”*

“Yes. Did yours have the orchestra?” Beth said.

“Yeah.”

“You heard the second one,” she said. “Go and listen to the original version.”

A couple days later I stopped by Beth’s office. “I listened to it.”

“What’d you think?”

“I like the new version better. Don’t get me wrong,” I said. “The original’s great. But the orchestra and even Joni’s voice in the 2nd – there’s this *depth* to it that’s hard to describe.”

Beth then paused for a second and said, “In the original version Joni’s singing the lyrics. In the second version she has *lived* those lyrics.”

What I love about this song is that it’s true. It’s real. It’s honest. It’s an honest depiction of the intersection of life and love. And in the experience of life and our invitation to love, there is this very real threat that if we love we might get hurt. In life we can give love, and not have it returned.

And yet, this is not only the central focus of our scripture reading from John, it’s the central focus of the entire Gospel of John, and the overarching whole of Christianity. In John chapter 3, the most well-known verse in the Bible, Jesus says, “*For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only son.*” And then in v. 12 of today’s reading Jesus says, “*This is my commandment, that you love one another, as I have loved you.*”

That Jesus makes love a commandment tells us something about it, or tells us the particular kind of love that he is inviting us into. To Jesus, love is not simply a feeling. In the beginning of Matthew’s gospel in the Sermon on the Mount Jesus says, “*You have heard that it was said, ‘Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ But I tell you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you.*”

When Jesus talks about loving enemies, he’s not talking about love as a feeling, or simply giving affection to your enemy, or getting those warm and fuzzy feelings towards someone where there is deep conflict. Because that sounds kind of impossible, doesn’t it?! If that is what Jesus is asking – warm and fuzzy feelings of love towards our enemies – well, I’m going to fail every time.

If love is a commandment, as it is for Jesus, we can’t command people to feel one way or another. You can’t command someone to *feel* love. It’s just not possible. Love is so much wider and deeper than a feeling. And so because Jesus commanded us to love, we know that the love he is describing is not a feeling.

For Jesus, love is a choice that we make. Love is a decision that we make. Love has action to it. Love is this way of life that he invites us into.

In verse 10 Jesus says, “If you keep my commandments ... you will be abide in my love.”

He is saying, “When you love, when you keep my commandment, you will be in the midst of my love.” In the exchange of life and love, it’s there where we will come to know God.

If Jesus’ commandment to us to love is *not* as a feeling, then maybe we can love those who are, well, hard for us to love. And so the family member that gets under our skin, or our neighbor that seems to find ways to consistently push our buttons, or that person who has very different political beliefs than we do, who we disagree with wholeheartedly, Jesus’s commandment to us is an invitation to go and not have warm and fuzzy feelings towards them. But it very well includes how we are to be in relationship with them, and how we treat, and speak, and act and listen to them.

Those that are the hardest for us to love - and we all have them - they probably teach us more about *how to love* than anyone.

What’s so challenging about this commandment is that it seems so hard to keep, and live, doesn’t it? At times it just seems impossible. It would be so much easier if Jesus just stuck with *The 10 Commandments* and not this one commandment. I could say to myself, “*So how did I do with those today? Alright, I did well yesterday. Check.*”

But did I love? How did I do with that? Okay. I did okay.

Every day, we probably start over when it comes to this commandment. And every day, in some way, we probably fail. We don’t love as we could.

And the only way is to rely on a love that is not our own, that is greater than our own. And it is to allow that love that comes from a larger Source to be flowing through us.

For this is the life that Jesus invites us into, it’s in the exchange of life and love - in the giving and receiving of love – in being willing to take the risk to love – to open ourselves to the mystery of what it means to love...

It’s there – that we will come to know the One who said, “*As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love.*”

Thanks be to God. Amen.