

“Approaching the Cross in Love and Suffering”

Reading: John 15

Written and preached by [Luke Richards](#)

Something is out of tune. I’m not talking about our piano or organ being out of tune, I mean something much, much bigger. You don’t have to have musical training or even much experience with music to be able to tell when something is out of tune. It’ll grab your ear and twist it if it’s out of tune. That’s one thing I learned in middle school band: you can tell if two trumpets are out of tune because you can hear them wavering when they play the same note. I’ve worked with people in ministry in the past who were not quite as skilled at singing harmony as they thought they were, and their singing would twist this tension into every song we sang. You don’t hear it as much as you can feel it in your gut; you might not have the words to explain in musical terms what’s wrong in that tune, but you know it’s not right.

Many of us are familiar with the books and movies of *The Lord of the Rings* by J.R.R. Tolkien; that story is just part of a much more expansive story Tolkien had in mind. He describes the creation of the realm of Middle Earth in a book called *The Silmarillion*, in which the world is created by God and his angels singing a vast, complex, incredibly beautiful song. But as they sing, one of the angels decides to introduce his own tune into the song, and the harmony is disrupted, and some of the other angels join him until there is just a cacophony, and the beautiful song seems like it’s ruined. Tolkien was describing the creation of a fictional world, of course, but he was also familiar enough with Christianity that he wasn’t too far off the mark. It’s like all of creation is resonating in a certain key, and yet there’s also this minor key underneath it that grabs us and twists us up. We might not be sure what the world is supposed to sound like, but we know this isn’t it.

Sometimes it’s something in the world around us, like a great world event or even a local tragedy that makes us cry out that it’s wrong. But it isn’t always some great cosmic problem: sometimes it’s a person we know and love building up that tension, or sometimes *we’re* the ones out of tune. Maybe it’s just one word or one sentence that comes out of our mouth and it’s so jarring because we suddenly know that it wasn’t *right*. Or maybe it’s a relationship that has ended up building so much tension and everything else ends up out of tune as a result, and maybe we even lose track of what our lives were supposed to sound like in the first place. It could even be one choice, one mistake that ends up leading us into our own tune, and we wander off, making our own imitation of music, out of tune with everything and everyone around us.

We all have that sense that there is *something* that we’re missing. I hope, at least, that you’ve come to the realization that the sun does not rise and set on you, that you are not enough, that as great and beautiful and talented as your life might be, you and I are still not quite in harmony with the way things ought to be. You and I are dust, and to dust we will return, and if we’re listening we’ll hear that things are not in tune.

If you’re anything like most of the people I know, you’ll spend most of your time trying to find that tune, trying to fit your life into that harmony that you know must be there somewhere. We’re constantly bombarded with ideas and teachings and philosophies about what it is that we’re missing. What is the harmony of the world, and how do you get yourself into that harmony? Maybe it’s that treadmill that leaves us in the grave, the never ending race of getting a job, getting ahead, making

some money, buying a house, starting a family, working hard to get to retirement, seeing your grandkids, and then...what? Maybe it's the never ending race to get more things, because I like having nice stuff and the TV commercials tell me I'll be happier if I get that next thing, and before long we're shoving stuff out of the way to make room for more stuff. Maybe it's the never ending race of being a good person, doing good things and being nice because it makes me feel better about myself.

Some ideas are less out of tune than others, but good luck with any of them lasting. Maybe in fact, we're doomed to live a life of striving for the next thing. Maybe there is no purpose, no meaning, no real harmony in all of creation. Maybe all of it is just a chaotic accident that hasn't fallen apart yet, and we delude ourselves when we hope for something more. Maybe we just need to resign ourselves to a life that is solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short.

That's where a lot of us end up, practically speaking. Even if there is a great harmony to the world, I must not be a part of it. I'm too far gone, too far out of tune, too messed up to be able to take part in it. What is there to look forward to beyond the next meal and the next distraction from my misery? And so we go further and further out of tune, seeking solace in a bottle or a prescription or a relationship or a physical act, and we have no hope. That tension of being out of tune just wears us out.

The words of Jesus that we read from John 15 point us in the direction of what our lives ought to be tuned to. The mission of Jesus was to show us that yes, the world was made to resonate in a certain key, and no, the world right now is not as it ought to be. We're right when we think that things are messed up, or when we stand around a casket and cry out that this isn't how it should be, or when we have an unfilled longing deep within to make sense of why we're here. Things ought to be different.

This chapter is part of Jesus' Farewell Discourse during His Last Supper with His disciples before He is betrayed and crucified. As we've been discovering over the last couple of weeks, listening in on this sermon is our chance to hear from Jesus some of what He thinks is most important for us to know. He begins the whole episode by setting aside all protocol and honor and taking the place of a servant by washing His disciples' feet. Right after that He reveals that He's fully aware that one of them is going to betray Him, and even the one who most fervently claims to be ready to lay down his life for Jesus is going to disown Him. But in spite of treachery and failure, Jesus insists that they don't need to worry because He's not going to abandon them. God's faithful presence is far more powerful than our faithless abandonment. But then, in our chapter today, He goes even beyond presence: God invites us to commune with Him, to draw our very life from being connected to Him, because we live and move and have our being in love – even though we're traitors.

Jesus gives them a new command, something different and a little unexpected: "Love each other as I have loved you," He says. He says it again, "This is my command: Love each other." He gives them a little more detail, also: "Greater love has no one than this, that they lay down their life for their friends." He's pointing them to the fact that He's doing something new right in front of them, even though they're having a hard time seeing it. He's building a new creation right in the midst of the old creation; He's starting up a new harmony right in the middle of the noise and chaos of a world that's out of tune. He is handing them a new way of life, except it's actually the oldest way of life because it's how things were meant to be before we twisted things out of tune. Love one another.

Love one another with the greatest love there is, the love that will lead you to lay down your own life for the sake of someone else. He is calling His followers to be a part of this new creation, this new community, that is characterized by that greatest love.

For a lot of us, I'd guess that we probably resonate with that statement that love is what it's all about. It's kind of worked its way into our culture that love is the best thing you can hope for. We all know that we need more love in our world, even if we don't really do anything to be more loving. The Beatles said that all you need is love. Just about every movie that comes out is going to have a love story somewhere in the plot, and a lot of them have nothing but a love story as the plot. We read books about relationships, we sing songs about love, we spend huge amounts of time and money to get that special someone to pay attention to me.

And if you're not spending that much time focused on love, I bet we could talk about how much time you spend trying to gain acceptance. Maybe you want to be the hero and have people look up to you. Maybe you want to be the one with the answers, so that everyone seeks you out. Maybe you want to be the one who's too cool to care, and you need everyone to know that you don't need them. It's a rare person who isn't searching for some sort of love, because just about everyone has that sense on some level that some sort of love is what we're looking for.

So is that it? Were the Beatles right, that love is all you need? And does that mean, therefore, that you're out of luck if you don't find someone who loves you? And what happens if you find someone who loves you and you still sense that something is out of tune? And what sort of love is Jesus talking about, anyway?

This is not just any love, this is the greatest love. Jesus is calling us to a love that goes much deeper than some namby-pamby, lovey-dovey, romance novel love. It goes much deeper than any love that is based on what I can get out of the object of my love. It's a love that lasts longer than affectionate feelings. It's a love that doesn't depend on whether you can make me feel good or repay me for my love. It's a love that is characterized by enduring faithfulness, a deep commitment that is willing even to sacrifice everything rather than abandon that other person. "Love one another *as I have loved you*," Jesus said. This is a love that reflects the love God has shown us, a love that sets aside everything else so that we might be reconciled with Him, a love that gives of Himself so that we might be healed and brought back into tune. Jesus showed us what this love means and how costly it can be. He told all of this to His followers just a matter of hours before the powers-that-be lashed out at Him and executed Him because they saw this new creation founded on love as a threat.

In Tolkien's version of the story of creation, that rebellious angel isn't content to stop with messing up the beginning of the song; he feels compelled to remain out of tune, wrecking the world to try to bend it to his chaotic song of rebellion. He becomes known as the Enemy of the World. It's the same in our world, and that's what Jesus is warning us about. For whatever reason, once we start heading out of tune we tend to just keep going, and our ears get twisted and we refuse – or are unable to – get back in tune. And sometimes we'll even get so invested in our own cacophony that we'll lash out at those who are trying to get us back in tune. That's what Jesus knew was looming before Him at the end of this Last Supper, that He would be murdered by those who were threatened by His message of the coming of God's kingdom and the triumphant tune it carried. And He's warning us that if we are so closely identified with Him that we take up that song of love, we need to be

prepared for people to lash out at us, too. It's not necessarily a sign of failure or God's abandonment. Sometimes it's even a sign that God thinks we're mature enough that we can handle it if He allows some suffering in our lives, and He knows we can use that suffering to grow deeper. Jesus responds to those who are out of His tune by loving them; the world responds to those who are living out of *its* tune by killing them.

Part of the problem is that we've given ourselves some funny ideas about love. Maybe it comes from the greeting card-industrial complex telling us that love is something that can fit into a few lines of poorly-written poetry on a pink, flowery card. Maybe it comes from the entertainment industry giving us tons of movies and TV shows full of disposable relationships. Or maybe it comes from the fact that we're out of tune with what we were created to be.

We'd better not overlook what Jesus said about how He is the vine and we are the branches. He says that if we abide in Him, if we remain connected to Him, we will bear much fruit. But if a branch is cut off from the vine that branch is sure to wither and die, and it's not good for much. We were made to bear that fruit, to show ourselves true followers of our God, to live in that love that is so powerful and faithful and life-changing. We can't do it alone. If we're cut off from the vine, we don't have what it takes on our own to love like that. We might copy it for a while, but we've got to be connected to God by abiding in Jesus Christ if we want to resonate with that love forever. All of creation was made to be in relationship with God, and things are out of tune because we have cut ourselves off from Him. It is through the work of Jesus that we find out what the greatest love is, and because of Him, we are able to get back into right relationship with God and live in His new creation.

It's not an easy love. It's hard to forgive people when they've hurt us. It's hard to be faithful to someone who hasn't been faithful back. It's hard to invest your life in someone and then watch them squander themselves in addictions or self-destructive behavior or bad choices. It's hard to listen and be with someone who doesn't honestly deserve it. It's a hard love, and yet this is the love that we are called to because this is the love that God offers us through Jesus Christ. You may not be any more worthy of that sort of love than I am, and yet that greatest love can't be earned.

Why would we live in tune with Jesus when we run such a risk with the world? Because the cacophony of the world will end one day, and the harmony of Jesus' kingdom will continue on eternally. You have the opportunity — the call upon your life — to know what that love is, that greatest love, that faithful, enduring love. It is only known by abiding in Christ. That is what life is for. That is how life is lived. That is how life is found. Abide in Christ.



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-Share Alike 2.5 License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/2.5/)