

Preacher: Pastor Twyla

Scripture: John 13:31-35

³¹ When he had gone out, Jesus said, “Now the Son of Man has been glorified, and God has been glorified in him. ³² If God has been glorified in him, God will also glorify him in himself and will glorify him at once. ³³ Little children, I am with you only a little longer. You will look for me, and as I said to the Jews so now I say to you, ‘Where I am going, you cannot come.’ ³⁴ I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. ³⁵ By this everyone will know that you are my disciples if you have love for one another.”

We begin with a short story from a Peanuts cartoon. It's Christmas time and Lucy comes in where Charlie Brown is standing and says, "Merry Christmas, Charlie Brown. 'Tis the season of peace on earth and good will toward men. Therefore, I suggest we forget all our differences and love one another."

Charlie Brown, whose face lights up at this, says, "That's wonderful, Lucy. I'm so glad you said that. But tell me, do we have to love each other only at this season of the year? Why can't we love each other all year long?"

Lucy retorts, "What are you, a fanatic or something?"

Ah love, perhaps, the most sought-after experience by everyone. The attributes of love can be surreal, intense and even challenging. It's the glue that can hold things together; and without it—well, you can see the results all over the world where love is abandoned. I couldn't help but be reminded of the Burt Bacharach song "What the world needs now is love sweet love. It's the only thing that there's just too little of. What the world needs now is love sweet love. No not just for some but for everyone."

We're foolish if we think God is not aware of this already. Throughout scripture we read about God's amazing and exuberant love for all of his creation, including us; but we also hear from the word, God's commandments directed to us to love him, to love others, and even to love our enemies.

The apostle Paul takes a stab at naming the attributes of love in 1 Corinthians 13:4-8a: "Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable; it keeps no record of wrongs; it does not rejoice in wrongdoing but rejoices in the truth. It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love never ends." The scriptures are loaded with instructions on how to love. But maybe none are so penetrating as the text that is before us today

Today's lectionary text from the Gospel of John, picks up in the middle of his account of Jesus' last supper with his disciples. Jesus is totally aware of where he is on the timeline of God's plan for his life. In fact, John tells us as much at the beginning of the chapter, as it is written, "Now before the festival of the Passover, Jesus knew that his hour had come to depart from this world and go to the Father."

His awareness of this reality, weighs on him, surely in several ways, but as John reveals here, Jesus recognizes how crucial it is in the time he has left with his disciples, that he does all he can to prepare them for the time he will no longer be with them. They will be the ones that continue the mission of building God's kingdom here on earth, and they seem yet unprepared for that venture. Jesus knows it will not be an easy road for them to travel, and without him there, they are going to need each other.

A lot is squeezed into these last moments Jesus had with his disciples; but the most significant teaching he wants to impress upon them is the **NEW** commandment, as he calls it, to love one another just as he has loved each of them. There have been other times when Jesus has taught the importance of loving others, including our enemies. What makes this a **NEW** commandment is the addition to the command to love as Jesus has loved. We know that the disciples have yet to learn the full extent of his love.

Jesus does make other attempts to teach the importance of this commandment. We read in John 13:13-15 that he said earlier in the evening after he washed the disciples' feet, "You call me Teacher and Lord—and you are right, for that is what I am. So, if I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. For I have set for you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you." And later, in John 15:12-14, Jesus said, "This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends. You are my friends if you do what I command you."

These two texts parallel John 13:34 and help to us understand the meaning of what Jesus meant here about "loving one another." On the one hand, loving one another as Jesus has loved encompasses the ordinary; it means serving one another, even in the most menial tasks. And on the other hand, this love includes courageous acts or taking great risks.

Jesus demonstrated the extent of this love commanded of us as he began with washing the feet of **all** of his disciples. He got down on his knees, took their dirty tired feet in his hands, and like a servant, he washed and dried them. Jesus also fed them. He did this even as he knew they would fail him. Remember, Judas was among the group at the table and Jesus knew he would betray him. Peter was there too, and Jesus knew he would deny him three times in Jesus' greatest time of anguish. Jesus knew the other disciples would not stand by him either. Yet he loved them all unconditionally and with full knowledge of what they would or would not do and certainly not because they were perfect. He just loved them.

In the same way, Jesus knows our past failures and he knows how we will hurt him and let him down in the future, yet he continues to love us and to forgive us. This then is the same kind of love we are to have for one another: giving love freely, serving one another and being willing to forgive. Even those we know as brothers and sisters in Christ are going to let us down and we may not necessarily see things eye-to-eye, but we are commanded to love them just as Jesus loved his beloved disciples—just as Jesus loves us, his present-day disciples.

Jesus revealed his love for his disciples and for us to be selfless and sacrificial. Jesus sacrificed, certainly, his own needs including his need for emotional support; but greater still, he sacrificed his very life so that all would be forgiven and set free from sin. He put aside his natural desire to avoid suffering and pain, his longing to live, so all would know the extent of his love which is one in the same of God's great love for everyone revealed through Christ. Jesus gave his life to save us.

Jesus' command to love each other as he loves us includes this element of selflessness, even sacrificial love. Loving each other should never be dependent on what we can get out of it. Manipulation and rewards are never attributes of loving others either; but sacrifice of oneself, one's own desires and needs for the benefit of another, is.

After the U.S.S. Pueblo was captured by the North Koreans, the eighty-two surviving crew members were thrown into a brutal captivity. In one particular instance thirteen of the men were required to sit in a rigid manner around a table for hours. After several hours, the door was violently flung open, and a North Korean guard brutally beat the man in the first chair with the

butt of his rifle. The next day, as each man sat at his assigned chair, again the door was thrown open and the man in the first chair was brutally beaten. On the third day, it happened again to the same man. Knowing the man could not survive, another young sailor took his place. When the door was flung open the guard automatically beat the new victim senseless. For weeks, each day a new man stepped forward to sit in that horrible chair, knowing full well what would happen. At last the guards gave up in exasperation. They were unable to beat that kind of sacrificial love.

The disciples were going to need a sacrificial kind of love for one another if they were going to rise above the battles they were going to need to fight to remain faithful to God and to fulfill their mission of building God's kingdom. The same is true for us.

Critics of the Gospel of John when reading this text say that John gives too much emphasis to mutual love within the community of disciples and does not address the topic of love to the outsider of the community or to one's enemies. But John, in no way, has forgotten that love is to reach beyond the walls of the faith community. For example, the proclamation we find John 3:16 says, "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life." This passage exudes with passion the desire of God for all people to know his love.

The emphasis here in John 13 seemingly put on mutual love within the faith community is critical to the impact of the testimony offered by the faithful to the lost. There is great wisdom that emerges in focusing on this "new" commandment, as it is called. Our life together and our love for each other speak millions to those beyond the walls of our building. It speaks louder than any theology we may preach to others.

There is a story about a man who was walking down the street. He passed a used-book store, and in the window he saw a book with the title *How to Hug*. He was taken by the title and, being of a somewhat romantic nature, went in to buy the book. To his chagrin, he discovered that it was the seventh volume of an encyclopedia and covered the subjects "How" to "Hug."

Everyone knows that the church is a place where love ought to be manifested, and many people have come to church hoping to find a demonstration of love – only to discover an encyclopedia on theology.

Our love for one another is evidence that God's love is alive in and through us. Words, while important, do not testify with the same intensity, the extent of God's love for all people. People need not only hear the Gospel message of God's love, but they need to see it in action. It is quite simply through our loving acts of service and sacrifice and our acts that point to the love of God that Jesus Christ is made real to the world. May others see and meet the Jesus in us as we love one another as he has loved us. Amen.