

Easter 5C 2019 Sermon

John 13:31-35

At the last supper, when Judas had gone out, Jesus said, "Now the Son of Man has been glorified, and God has been glorified in him. If God has been glorified in him, God will also glorify him in himself and will glorify him at once. 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.' I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another."

The last several Sundays, we have seen how important it is, when reading John's Gospel, to notice the setting of the story. In today's Gospel, it is Maundy Thursday, and we are at Jesus' Last Supper with his disciples. Jesus has just washed his disciples' feet. He has told Judas, "do quickly what you are going to do" (v. 27) – and Judas has left to betray him. Jesus knows that Peter will deny him – not once, but three times (v. 38), and that he will soon be crucified. Betrayal and denial by his closest friends, and then, crucifixion: this is what Jesus knows is about to happen. And *this* is the context in which he gives the command, "Love one another, as I have loved you."

Biblical scholar Karoline Lewis notes that *without* this context, Jesus' new commandment "becomes another biblical platitude quoted by those who think it's easy and who rarely stick to it themselves. It ends up on posters with the backdrop being some sort of idyllic scene of an ocean, snow-capped mountains... or birds flying across a bright blue sky"¹ with the decorative words, "Love one another." We must never forget that this commandment is given in the context of Jesus knowing that one disciple is about to betray him and another deny him three times, and that he will then be tortured and crucified. This context tells us about the extent and nature of the love **Jesus** has for *us*, **and** about the love he is commanding *us* to have for one another.

We have also seen, time and again, that John loves to use words that have double meanings. So, it should not surprise us that there is a *different* way of translating a key verse in today's Gospel. The sentence "Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another" can also be translated "I have loved you *in order that* you also love one another."² I'm convinced that John intends *both* meanings. We are to love one another in the same way and to the same extent that Jesus loves; **AND**, Jesus' love *empowers* us to love one another in the same way and to the same extent that he has loved us. Love is not just a *commandment* in this passage; it is also an empowering invitation and **gift**. The deep love that a mother has for her child can empower that child to show kindness and compassion to others. The deep love that Christ has for *us* empowers *us* to love others in the same manner, and to the same extent, as Christ loves us.

The Son of God *showed* his love for us by emptying himself³ and descending from heaven to become flesh⁴, being born a totally vulnerable baby. The Son of God showed his love for us as he healed the sick, befriended society's outcasts, challenged the powers that be, and taught us through Beatitudes, parables, example, and instruction. The Son of God showed his love for us by willingly suffering betrayal and denial by his closest friends, enduring torture, and pouring out his life for us on the cross. "Having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end," our Eucharistic Prayer [D] says, quoting John's Gospel in this same chapter. (13:1)

Now, the Old Testament has a commandment, which Jesus quotes: "Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself." (Lev. 19:18) We should love our neighbor in the same way, and to the same extent, that we love our self. But what if you don't love *yourself* in a **healthy** way, or if your self-love is too self-centered? Then, if you love your neighbor as yourself, you won't love your *neighbor* very well, either.

What is different about Jesus' NEW commandment is that he is not telling us to use our love of *self* as the model, the standard for how we should love others; he is saying that we should use **his** love as the model for how we should love others!

And we can clearly **see** Jesus' love being lived out in his *life*, as he has compassion on the poor, the sick, foreigners, sinners, the outcasts of society, and he works to restore wholeness in them. But most clearly, we can see his love on full display in the last week of his life, when he was betrayed, denied, unjustly condemned, tortured, and crucified, yet still said from the cross, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do." The cross is the central symbol of our Christian faith because it powerfully, wordlessly recalls the manner and extent of Jesus' love for us. It is **this** kind of love, this *degree* of love, that Jesus' NEW commandment asks us to imitate. My friends, when we gaze at a cross, or put on a cross necklace or pin, we are not simply *remembering* Jesus' death for us; we are looking at Jesus' *example* for how **we** are to love! "**As** I have loved you, you also should love one another." We are called to compare the way we treat others – especially the poor, the sick, the foreigner, and those that society has discounted or cast out – to compare the way **we** treat these people with the way *Jesus* did; we are, consciously and intentionally, to *imitate* his way of love.

But this would be far too daunting a task if it were not for the *second* meaning of that verse, which I mentioned earlier. The Greek words that most Bibles translate, "Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another," can also be translated, "I have loved you *in order that* you also love one another."² Jesus' love for **us** makes it possible for *us* to love one another as **he** loves us. For in loving us, what Jesus is actually doing is drawing us into the divine flow of love shared between the Persons of the Trinity. Think of the three persons of the Trinity as a circle of giving and receiving love: The Father pours out his love into the Son, who receives that gift and pours out his love into the Holy Spirit, who

receives that gift and pours out her love into the Father, and on and on. To say that Jesus loves us is to say that he draws us **into** this divine flow of pouring out and receiving love. Jesus' act of pouring himself into humanity at his conception and birth was part of that divine flow; and his act of pouring out his life on the cross was part of that divine flow. And since both of these actions – his birth *and* his crucifixion – were “for” us, it means that he is inviting **us** into that divine flow of love.

There's another clue in today's Gospel reading that supports this interpretation – and it's the same clue John gave in our Gospel reading two weeks ago. In both stories, Jesus calls his disciples “children.” In fact, in today's Gospel, he calls them “*little* children” – a strange way to address mature adults! But both Gospel passages intend for the reader to think back to the very beginning of John's Gospel, where John tells us, “To all who received him ... he gave **power** to become *children* of God.” (1:12) And, typical of John, the word “children” has at least two connotations: First, little children are much beloved by their parents; and second, children share the DNA – and therefore many of the traits – of their parents. Indeed, in the Hebrew language, to be a “child of” someone means that you share the character and identity of that person. In English, we say, “She's her mother's daughter!” – meaning that she's just like her mother. So the phrase, “To all who received him... he gave power to become children of God” means that in receiving the love of Christ, we are empowered to become **like** him, and love as **he** loves. God's children share God's DNA! *That's* what it **means** to be a child of God! C.S. Lewis wrote: “Now the whole offer which Christianity makes is this: that we can, if we let God have His way, come to share in the life of Christ... Every Christian is to become a little Christ. The whole purpose of becoming a Christian is simply nothing else.”⁵ And St. Peter, in his Second Epistle, tells us that we share in the divine nature. (2 Peter 1:4) If we share in the divine nature, share in the DNA of Christ, then we have the capability of loving as he loves.

Professor Gail O'Day, one of today's foremost scholars on the Gospel of John, urges us to understand Jesus' cross the way **John** understands the cross in *his* Gospel – as the supreme revelation of God's self-giving, loving nature, rather than seeing the cross in terms of a “sacrificial price needed to pay our debt.” Dr. O'Day writes: “To interpret Jesus' death as the ultimate act of love enables the believer to see that the love to which Jesus summons the community is not the giving *up* of one's life, but the giving *away* of one's life. The distinction... is important, because the love that Jesus embodies is grace, not sacrifice. Jesus gave his life to his disciples as an expression of the fullness of his relationship with God and of God's love for the world. Jesus' death in love, therefore, was not an act of self-denial, but an act of fullness, of living out his life and identity fully, even when that living would ultimately lead to death.”⁶

O' Day offers the life of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. as a contemporary example. She writes: “[King's] death came not because he chose to *give up* his life for

others, but because he chose to live the love of Jesus fully.”⁶ His death came not because he chose to *give up* his life for others, but because he chose to live the love of Jesus fully.

And that’s what John’s Gospel calls *us* to do: to live the love of Jesus fully. When we do that, everyone will know that we are followers of Christ, because we live and act like him. Then, in the words of today’s final hymn, “They will know we are Christians by our love.”

AMEN

¹ <https://www.workingpreacher.org/craft.aspx?post=4607>

² Raymond E. Brown, S.S., *The Gospel According to John, XIII-XXI, The Anchor Bible, Vol. 29A*, New York: Doubleday, 1970, p. 607

³ Philippians 2:7

⁴ John 1:14

⁵ *Mere Christianity*, Chapter 26

⁶ Gail O’Day, *The New Interpreter’s Bible, Vol. IX*, Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995, “John,” p. 734)