

Love One Another!

John 13:31-35 1 Corinthians 13: 1-13
College Hill Presbyterian Church, Tulsa

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April 24, 2016

On the night that Jesus shared a final meal with his disciples, he said, according to the Gospel of John, "I give you a new commandment, that you **love one another**" (John 13:34a). New Testament scholar D.A. Carson (*The Gospel according to John*, 1991) rightly observes:

This new command is simple enough for a toddler to memorize and appreciate, and it is profound enough that the most mature believers are repeatedly embarrassed at how poorly they comprehend it and put it into practice.

Jesus continues, "By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another" (v. 35). Biblical commentator Gary Jones adds, "How embarrassing it is for many of us who call ourselves Christian to recall that Jesus wanted to make it easy for us by having us focus on this one thing; yet we have found so many other ways to identify true believers and often have a hard time putting this commandment into practice even in our own [daily and] family lives."

More and more progressive Christians are realizing that Jesus himself did not talk much about the importance of the Bible or a carefully constructed creed or confession. The New Testament, of course, wasn't written until two generations and more after Jesus' death. It took centuries, for instance, for combative theologians to hammer out the Nicene Creed. As the emerging Christian institution of organized religion wrestled with power and orthodoxy, through the development of theological doctrines and creeds that grew into church dogma, the one thing most important to Jesus got pushed to the sidelines, if not almost lost altogether. Think of all the wars that have been fought, and all the oppression and injustice over who held or holds "correct" beliefs. All the while, this was not Jesus' primary concern. His was not the way of learned theologians and intelligent preachers, let alone unintelligent and ignorant preachers.

No, Jesus said to his followers, "Little children...I give you a new commandment, that you love one another." **Notice that this commandment says nothing about what it is we should believe. Instead, and much more profoundly, it instructs us in how to live.** How many times must it be said – evidently time and time again – that **in most all religious traditions, faith is not about belief, but about practice?**

In her 2004 autobiographical work, *The Spiral Staircase: My Climb Out of Darkness*, Karen Armstrong, renowned scholar of comparative religions, notes that religion is not having to believe or accept certain difficult propositions; instead, **"religion is about doing things that change you."** We spent the entire season of Lent this year reflecting on the importance of our journey of repentance, the ultimate goal being our personal and corporate transformation. That transformation is expressed in how we live our lives guided by the ways of Jesus, thus the ways of God; ways of compassion, forgiveness, justice, mercy, kindness, peace, patience, joy, and especially love.

So if organized religion is going to impose a litmus test on who's a true Christian, then it shouldn't be based on one's beliefs, but rather on who effectively manifests the love of Christ in their life. After all, Jesus did not say, "By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you believe the right things." No, it was, "if you have love for one another" (v. 35).

So let me ask: **Would anyone know you are a person of faith, a follower of Jesus, by your love – as demonstrated in how you treat others, and yourself? The same question can be asked of us a congregation, as this community of faith.**

Throughout history, the church's witness in the world has unfortunately been hurt and diminished by the lack of love – sometimes to the point of hatred – that marks how Christians often deal with each other. In fact, recent surveys reveal that in our day and age the divisions and discord *within* the Christian community – now often perceived as narrow, close-minded and judgment – have become the dominate signal to the world around us, not how we supposedly love one another. And we wonder why overall church membership and attendance are down in this country. **We have almost turned off an entire younger generation to organized religion. Yet, people are hungry to connect with God, and to become part of an authentic, inclusive and caring community. That's what College Hill strives to be.** And therefore, there is a need to refocus our attention on the command to love one another.

So how do we learn ways to put love into practice? Well, the apostle Paul has some very helpful instructions. Paul wrote a couple of letters to the community of faith he founded in the ancient Greek city of Corinth, by then a Roman colony. Much of the remarkable diversity of this bustling commercial port city was reflected within the membership of that congregation. But instead of finding unity in the midst of their diversity, they were plagued by conflict, divisions, factions and cliques – in other words, a microcosm of Christianity today.

Paul's first letter is a response to theirs, asking him to help resolve some of their differences. Part of Paul's response, using the image of different parts of the body to make up the whole, was to remind them that every member of the congregation is blessed with different gifts, talents, abilities, and resources for ministry. **Every member of the congregation, therefore, deserves to be treated with equal respect. That is just as true today.**

Paul's point is simple to understand, but not always easy to put into practice. It is in this context that Paul directly addresses the issue of how the community of faith must put its love into action. Acknowledging, and therefore scolding those church members who had attitudes and practices that exhibited impatience, unkindness, envy, stubbornness, arrogance, irritability and resentment, Paul employed a literary technique that explained the *opposite* of their behavior when he wrote the poetic and lofty words:

*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 or resentful;
it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth.
Love bears all things, believes all things,
hopes all things, endures all things.
Love never ends.*

We, of course, are most familiar with these words because they are almost always recited during a marriage ceremony between two people in love. You can see that in its original context, however, Paul is not addressing a marriage relationship (even though those words can still apply) but rather the kind of love that should be exhibited in the relationships between the members of any community of faith. The Greek word for this kind of love is *agape*.

Love, as Paul understands it, translates into a way of life that is not egocentric and does not insist on its own way, but is self-giving for the common good of all. This was the love that Jesus expressed and commanded of his followers. This is the love that is the expected norm for Christian behavior. As we have seen, this is what Jesus said would differentiate us, as followers of Christ, from others.

Love, then, is to be concrete, practical and applied to our daily lives. And in this particular biblical context, that especially applies to the life and ministry of a congregation. In this manner, **love is indeed more of an action than it is a feeling or emotion. Love is a matter of Christian ethics – of how we treat one another.**

Within a congregation, then, how is love demonstrated? Love is demonstrated through our patience with and forgiveness of each other, by refusing to hold grudges or stoop to petty retaliation, by shunning competitiveness, by resisting keeping score or becoming resentful. Our love for one another helps us to remain hopeful, it keeps us humble, and it is inclusive and respectful of everyone.

Let us not forget the transformative power of living a way of life marked by loving acts of kindness, caring and compassion, of humble service to others, of genuinely listening to one another with an empathetic ear in an effort to get to know each other better as persons. It is in doing so we become shaped more and more in the image of God in which we were created – an image which dwells within each and every one of us, each and every person on this planet. We become more and more identified with Jesus, who embodies love for us and the world.

Love for one another must be the defining characteristic of our community of faith. That love, I believe, should be extended to persons of other faith traditions, and to those of no faith tradition. For ultimately, our love for one another is much more important than any particular theological position to which we claim and hold dear, as important as that is to most of us.

And from a good Calvinistic perspective, let me state that it is by the grace of God and the Sacred Presence within us that enables and empowers us to exhibit this kind of love for one another.

“And now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love” (1 Cor. 13:13). I can think of no better words to express all this than those found in the old beloved hymn, “And they’ll know we are Christians by our love, by our love. Yes, they’ll know we are Christians by our love.”

May that love be evident in you, and me, and in this community of faith!

Amen.

Resources:

Gary D. Jones, *Feasting On the Word*