

A New Commandment: Love One Another!

John 13:31-35 1 Corinthians 13: 1-13
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On the night that Jesus washed his disciples' feet and shared a final meal with them, 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). But why does the gospel writer put on the lips of Jesus that this is a "new" commandment? After all, in the Hebrew scriptures, our Old Testament, Leviticus 19:18 commands, "You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against any of your people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself." Therefore, **the new part of Jesus' command must be the added phrase, "... love one another just as I have loved you"**.

How has Jesus shown them how he loves them? In the context of this biblical passage, Jesus had just showed them an example of his love for them by washing their feet. That's a deeper demonstration of love than just saying we need to be kind to each other and serve one another. According to the biblical commentator folks at the saltproject.org, "**Footwashing upends conventional wisdom about social status, power, and prestige.**" They write, "First, Jesus reverses these "above" and "below" roles. And second, the foot washing upends conventional wisdom about purity and impurity, "clean" and "unclean." When Jesus explains that the foot washing will allow Peter to have a "share with me" (or to "participate in me"), Peter enthusiastically asks for a full bath... What's on Peter's mind is a mistaken belief that he requires purification. Jesus assures him otherwise, as if to say, *Don't doubt your worth or propriety — I'm not washing you because you're unclean, but rather in order to demonstrate the kind of dignifying love I have in mind* (John 13:6-10)... **Take up my mantle! Love as I have loved you, making friends, not servants, bridging divides between "above" and "below," "insider" and "outsider," "clean" and "unclean."**..."

"Accordingly, following Jesus' "new commandment" today means living out this dignifying, leveling, bridge-building love in our own lives and circumstances. When Pope Francis — in one of his first public acts as pope — washed and kissed the feet of twelve inmates at a youth prison on Maundy Thursday, including (for the first time in papal history) two women and two Muslims, he **embodied this "new commandment"**

love in his context... And **so does anyone today [including you and me] whose love helps knit a broken, divided world back together.**"

However, in a provocative Robert Reich opinion piece posted in *The Guardian* a few years back, entitled "**The second American civil war is already happening,**" he claims, "**America will still be America. But it is fast becoming two versions of itself. The open question is: how will the two be civil toward each other? Does society, in general, see Christians on the far right and the far left loving one another? If not, then the judgment of not living fully as one of Jesus' disciples is valid.** Metaphorically, we certainly are not washing each other's feet. And yes, it often feels like we are in a civil war with one another, one that isn't very civil.

Also, note that **this "new commandment to love one another" says nothing about what it is we should believe, theologically or politically. Instead, and much more profoundly, it instructs us in how to live – how to put our faith into action.** 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."**

Our own transformation, then, is expressed in how we live our lives as guided by the ways and teachings of Jesus, thus the ways of God; ways of compassion, forgiveness, justice, mercy, kindness, peace, patience, joy, and especially love. 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).

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 disdain, dismissiveness, even hatred and violence – 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 judgmental – have become the dominate signal to the world around us, not how we supposedly love one another. And yes, we play into this equation. It's not just "those on the other side" of the theological and political spectrum from ourselves.** And we wonder why overall church membership and attendance are in decline in this country. Our inability to love across the theological and political spectrum is turning off an entire younger generation to organized religion. I can understand that. Yet, **people, young and old, are hungry to experience and connect with God's Sacred Presence, and many truly desire to become part of an authentic, inclusive, and caring community of faith.** That's what College Hill strives to be. And therefore, **there is a need to refocus our attention and efforts on the command to love one another.**

And note, in this particular biblical context, Jesus didn't give a broader commandment to love the world, or even our neighbors, let alone our enemies. In this context he commands we love *one another*. That's love for each other right here within this very community of faith. And no, that's not always easy. It is to be this mutual love for one another by which others will know we are followers of the ways and teachings of Jesus.

So how do we learn ways to put love into practice? Well, the apostle Paul has some very helpful instructions. Paul, in his first letter to the Christian community in Corinth, employed a literary technique that explained the *opposite* of the behavior they were exhibiting 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, of us. 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 embodied and enacted in our daily lives, and especially directed toward each other. In this manner, love is indeed more of an action than it is a feeling or emotion. For **love is a matter of Christian ethics – of how we treat one another.** Therefore, within our own community of faith our love for one another can be enacted, for instance:

- by our patience with and forgiveness of each other,
- by refusing to hold grudges,
- by avoiding passive aggressive behavior.
- by shunning competitiveness, and
- by resisting the temptation to keep score or becoming resentful.

Our love for one another helps us to remain hopeful, it keeps us humble, and it must be inclusive and respectful of everyone. It is in doing so we build authentic community. **Love for one another must be the defining characteristic of our community of faith.** And from a good Calvinistic perspective, **it is by the grace of God and that 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). May that love for one another be evident in you, and me, and in this community of faith!

Amen.

Resources:

Gary D. Jones, *Feasting On the Word*

“Love Is the Mark: SALT’S Commentary for Easter 5”, saltproject.org, 5-10-22.

Robert Reich, “The second American civil war is already happening”, *The Guardian*, 5-11-22.

<https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2022/may/11/second-american-civil-war-robert-reich?fbclid=IwAR02zx6NHdfMCIRg9KI396bHSfvCCybAg-IDRCdzcK4Uimy99YiWytKMAc>