

Love One Another

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John 13:34-35

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I continue today with my short sermon series “Back to Basics.” I find that the interim time in the church is a good time to review the basics of our Christian faith, to remember what beliefs we share in common, what binds us together as a Christian community, what makes us as a church distinct from other human groups. And what really binds us together is the person of Jesus Christ, who once said to his disciples “If you love me, you will keep my commandments.” I am preaching on three of Jesus’ commands: follow me, love one another, and go. Today I focus on the commandment “Love one another”, which I understand from its context as a commandment just for the church family alone. It was not a commandment given by Jesus to the crowd or to the world, but was spoken only in the intimacy of the Upper Room and only to the 12 disciples, who represented the beginning of the early church. And “love one another” was only preserved by John, whose gospel focuses a lot on the Christian community.

Let me begin with a story. I graduated from college with a degree in business and a concentration in accounting. My first job out of college was as an auditor for the State of Alaska in its capital city of Juneau. I wound up in a big office of auditors, and from my conversations with them, not many of them seemed religiously inclined. Well, maybe a little religious, sort of, kind of. They did have a god they worshipped: first name Jack, last name Daniels. And they had a discipline for their religion that would put some of us to shame. Almost every day after work they went down to the Temple (otherwise known as “The Red Dog Saloon”) and sat at a big round table together and usually one of the audit managers acted as the high priest and did the call to worship: “Bartender, JD, all around.” When Jack arrived at the table, they would begin to have a spiritual experience - sort of, kind of. They don’t call it “spirits” for nothing. As far as I could tell this was the office I worked in: working with numbers during the day, hitting the sauce at night.

So, it surprised me one day while I was discussing a particular audit with my audit supervisor that he told me in an off-hand sort of way that he was a Christian. I told him that I was a Presbyterian Christian and that I attended the Chapel on the Lake Presbyterian Church, and then I asked what church he attended, and he said, “Oh, I don’t go to church. I don’t need the church. I follow Jesus on my own.”

Jesus’ commandment “love one another” immediately came to mind, and I wondered to myself how one would fulfill that particular commandment of Jesus without a church full of challenging church members to practice that love on.

He would not be the last person to say such a thing to me. We live increasingly in what I have sometimes called a “Home Depot” society, a nation of self-sufficient do-it-yourselfers, and sometimes that spirit of American self-sufficiency extends to Christian faith. There is that sense among some Christians I’ve met along the way that you can do anything on your own, even follow Jesus by yourself.

And yet the gospels present to us a very different picture. When Jesus said to prospective disciples “Follow me” and they followed, Jesus immediately led them into a community of other Jesus followers, which would in time be called the church. For the next three years 12 Jesus followers lived together in community with Jesus and one another, talked together, ate together, traveled together, continued to follow Jesus together, listened to and watched Jesus together. The gospels tell us that when you respond to Jesus’ call to “Follow Me”, you get not only Jesus but the church as well. It’s a package deal. The gospels seem to say that you can’t have one without the other. In other words, we each need the help of other Jesus followers to continue to follow Jesus.

And according to Jesus in our scripture this morning, the central task of the church in their relationship with one another is to love one another according to the model or example of love that Jesus left behind, which is a model of faithfulness and commitment to one another right to the end, forbearance, forgiveness, humble mutual service, and mutual sacrifice. It’s that Christ-like love between Jesus followers that according to Jesus in John’s gospel becomes the church’s primary witness or evangelism to the world. The Christ-like love between the disciples is the proof to the world that they are indeed Jesus’ disciples.

Now the love that Jesus has in mind for his original disciples, and for those of us in the church today, wasn’t easy for him and isn’t easy for us. In fact, you could say that Jesus’ love for his disciples cost him his very life. Jesus himself on the night before his death said, “No one has greater love than this, to lay down one’s life for one’s friends.” And then, the next day, he did exactly that.

And my sense is that those 12 original disciples weren’t easy to love. Let me go over with you what we know from the gospels about the 12, and see what you think.

To me, the most interesting pair of Jesus’ disciples for our time were: Matthew the tax collector and Simon the Zealot, who were polar opposites politically, and yet both were called by Jesus to be his disciples, to follow him and to love one another.

Matthew (also called Levi) was one of the 12. When Jesus met him for the first time, he was a Jewish tax collector, collecting taxes from his fellow Jews for the Roman empire. Jewish tax collectors at the time were notorious for collecting more taxes than the Romans asked for and pocketing the excess and becoming rich. Jewish tax collectors believed that

you should cooperate with the empire to enrich yourself, even if meant stealing from your fellow citizens. Tax collectors were pariahs in Jesus' time, hated with an intense white-hot hatred for being traitors and betrayers of the Jewish nation. Jews in Jesus' time had an expression to describe the worst of the worst in Jewish society that turns up in the gospels, which was "tax collectors and sinners", and one of the central public accusations against Jesus was that he ate with tax collectors and sinners, meaning that he accepted the worst of the worst in his society as friends.

Simon the Zealot was opposite of Matthew politically. Simon belonged to a Jewish political group of the time called the Zealots. The Zealots believed that you never cooperate with the Empire in any way. Zealots believed in the bloody, violent overthrow of the Romans. A subgroup within the Zealots were the Sicarii, known for hiding within their long robes long sharp curved knives called Sicarii. They would look for opportunities to get alone with Romans soldiers or Roman officials or Jews that they perceived had betrayed the Jewish nation, slit their throats, leave them to bleed out and die and quietly disappear into the crowd. I wonder personally if Simon the Zealot ever considered slitting Matthew's throat, and if Matthew was ever nervous about having Simon the Zealot around. Jesus called Matthew and Simon the Zealot, political opposites, to follow him and to love each other as he had loved them both.

James and John, sons of their father Zebedee, were nicknamed by Jesus "Boanerges" which translates as "the sons of thunder", and I'm not sure it was a compliment. Jesus probably nicknamed them that for their thunderous judgments against people who rejected Jesus. When a group of Samaritans rejected Jesus, it was James and John who asked Jesus to call down fire from heaven to burn them all to a crisp as punishment for their rejection. Jesus was appalled that they would even think this and sharply rebuked them for saying it.

James and John also made the other 10 disciples hopping mad when they found out that the brothers had secretly lobbied Jesus for the seats of honor in Jesus' kingdom above the other disciples. James and John even recruited their own mother to lobby Jesus for this on their behalf.

It wasn't just James and John. All the disciples liked to argue among themselves as to who among them was the greatest.

Nathanael was prejudiced against Jesus' hometown. You may remember that Nathanael, first hearing that Jesus was from Nazareth, said, "Can any good thing come out of Nazareth?"

None of the disciples ever seemed to get Jesus while he was in the flesh. They were slow to understand him, if they understood at all. Some doubted right up until the end, Thomas in particular.

Judas Iscariot was in charge of the group's money bag and regularly stole money out of the bag for himself. And of course it was Judas who in the end betrayed Jesus in exchange for money. Peter denied three times publicly that he even knew Jesus. And when Jesus was arrested in the garden of Gethsemane, all of the disciples forsook him and fled, trying to save their own skin.

It's shocking to consider that this is the group Jesus is addressing in the upper room when he says, "Love one another." The gospel of John does not record the reaction of the disciples to this commandment but let me share with you where my imagination took me. I imagine one of the disciples saying to himself in response to Jesus "new" commandment: "What? Love one another? Love these people that I have come to know so well? Jesus, you have got to be kidding! Love Peter? Love that guy who can never keep his trap shut? Love James and John? Love those little secretive hot-head power-hungry connivers who go behind our backs and think they're better than us? Love Simon the Zealot? Love him with all of his anger management issues and violent tendencies? Love Matthew the tax collector? That Roman-loving weasel? Love Nathanael? With all his little prejudices? Love Judas? That thief! That betrayer! You have got to be kidding!

Well, Jesus wasn't kidding. And the kind of love Jesus has in mind when he says "Love one another" is the most difficult love. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus he once said, "If you love those who love you, what credit is that to you?" In our own language he might have said, "Oh, so you love those who love you back? So what? Big fat hairy deal! Even Gentiles who know nothing about God do that." But I say to you, Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you." That's the kind of love Jesus had in mind. Love as working in the best interest of those you don't necessarily like or who don't like you. Staying committed to those who don't love you back. Serving those who make life more difficult for you than it should be. Sacrificing for those who thwart you from getting what you want in this life. That kind of love, difficult love, unrequited love, is specifically Christian love, that's the kind of love Jesus modeled and taught, and it takes divine power working within us to love like that. We can't do it on our own. We need help to love like that.

Now let's shine the light of the gospel on St Charles Avenue Presbyterian Church. What is Jesus asking you to do in this church right now when he says "Love one another?" Jesus' inclusion of politically opposite Matthew the tax collector and Simon the Zealot into his group of disciples, calling them both to follow him and to love one another, is especially relevant and challenging in our time. My sense is that Jesus today is asking

you to love those in this church who are politically different from you, asking Democrats in the congregation to love Republicans and Independents, asking conservatives to love progressives and middle of the roaders, asking MSNBC viewers to love Fox News viewers, and to love them even when you look across the political divide and think the other has completely lost their mind.

Jesus is asking you to love those in the congregation whose personalities annoy you, to love those whose outrageous ambitions make you mad, whose obvious prejudices drive you bonkers, and to love even those whose morals you wonder about.

Jesus is asking those of you who are very active in the life of this church, and keep it going with your time and energy and money to love those who are less active, or maybe not at all active, less committed, and vice-versa.

Jesus is asking those of you with a whole lot of education, money, possessions and social standing and power to love those in the congregation with less of those things, or a lot less of those things, and asking those of you with very little of those things to love those who have a lot of them.

Jesus is asking those of you who have been at the church for 40 years or more to love those newbies among you, and asking the newbies to love the old-timers.

Jesus is asking those of you in the church who have hurt or failed or disappointed or betrayed each other recently or years ago, to let go of a past that cannot be changed, and love one another, to embrace one another again, creating a future that can be changed.

To love one another in the church means not to see each other first in terms of political differences or theological or moral ones, or different socio-economic standing, or level of commitment to the church, or church longevity, or in terms of success or failure in a relationship, but to see each other first and foremost as those who have been made in the image of God, made in the likeness of the divine; to see each other first as those for whom Christ died and was resurrected; to see each other first as those who have been declared Beloved by God for the sake of Jesus Christ; to see each other first as followers of Jesus Christ and those who have been called by Christ alone to be members of this congregation. To love one another does not mean barely tolerating one another, but fully embracing one another in relationship as beloved children of God, even with all those differences and flaws between you.

There is a story told about the apostle John, who is generally credited as the author of the gospel of John. This story about John is not told in the Bible, but one that has come down to us through church tradition. It is a story that the church has seen from the beginning as reliable and authentic because it is so consistent with what we know about John. The story is told that when the apostle John was nearing the end of his life, he had become a

frail old man who couldn't walk and had to be carried around from church to church on a pallet. He would preach to the congregations lying down on his pallet, and even though he had been an eye-witness to all that Jesus said and did, at the end of his life there was only one thing Jesus said that really stuck with John and that he wanted to share with the churches. And so when he preached from his pallet to the churches, he had only one thing to say the churches and he would repeat it to them over and over and over. He would say, "Love one another. Love one another. Love one another."

In the ending to this sermon series, Jesus will call us to go, to go out on mission to the world, to share the love of God in word and deed beyond the walls of the church with those who know it not. But we'll never be able to love the world well until we have first learned to love one another in the church well, which means first to fully embrace one another in the church even with all of our differences and flaws. Amen.