

Sermon  
Year C  
5th Sunday of Easter  
May 15, 2022  
John 13: 31-35

“I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another.” Amen.

This morning, because it’s incredibly important, and key to following Jesus, we’re continuing a theme that Father Rob has been preaching about for awhile: loving one another. Although this particular gospel lesson only appears once every three years as a gospel lesson, Jesus’s new commandment is so important to what Christians believe that we have a day in Holy Week named after it. Does anyone know? It’s Maundy Thursday. On Maundy Thursday we hear this passage, along with the story of the last supper, and Jesus’s washing of the disciples’ feet. In fact, we get the word Maundy from the Latin translation of the word commandment: in Latin it’s “mandatum” which eventually became the Middle English word maundé. So Maundy Thursday is “commandment” Thursday—the day in which we remember that Jesus gave us the new commandment to love one another.

To love one another. Some of you might say that the commandment to love one another was not actually a new one, because in Leviticus the Israelites were commanded to “love your neighbor as yourself.” So what’s new here? For one thing, Jesus says, “just as I have loved you, you also should love one another.” Now that is a tall order. Not just love your neighbor as yourself, but love as Jesus loved us. And I think we’ve talked before about how loving one another doesn’t necessarily mean feeling warm fuzzy affection for one another. It can mean wanting what is best for the other person, even when they make you mad. It can mean being respectful to someone, even when they treat you badly. Remember Paul’s description in first Corinthians of loving as Jesus loved us; it’s not emotion, so much as it is action. He says we’re to be patient, kind, not jealous, or boastful, or arrogant or rude. Love doesn’t insist on its own way. Love rejoices in the truth. Love puts up with a lot, hopes for the best, wants the best for everyone. Paul says that faith and hope are good, but the greatest thing is love.

So if Jesus and Paul both emphasize the importance of love—how is it that we’ve gone so far off course? As Christians we’ve often focused on doctrine and theology and creeds—which are not bad, but we’ve often forgotten that the most important thing is to follow Jesus by loving one another. Jesus even says “by this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.” It’s about action, it’s about behavior. How do we treat one another at home? At work? How do we treat the stranger in the grocery store? This behavior is what’s important, not only because it creates community, but because it changes us. When we act in loving ways, when we do the loving thing, it can change our hearts and minds.

A few months ago I was supporting a family whose father was on hospice care in the hospital. This man had been peacefully lying in bed, unresponsive, without food or water for six days. The doctor said most of the man's organs had shut down, yet he continued to breathe shallowly and regularly, and his daughters were wondering how in the world this could still be the case.

"Well," I said, "this process is different for everyone. And now, it's not really about medicine, or treatment—it's between your father and God. Your father has to be ready to go. Have you told him that it's okay to leave you?" I asked.

"Oh, yes—over and over again," one daughter answered. "We told him we'll all be fine, and that he can go to be with Jesus."

"Good—that's wonderful," I said. "Is there, maybe something he might feel has been left undone?" I asked.

"Like what? We told him we'll pay the bills, and take care of his cats—what do you mean?"

"I don't know," I said. "Is there someone he's maybe waiting to say goodbye to?"

At this, the daughters shared uncomfortable glances.

"What about Beth?" one asked.

"She won't come," another replied.

"Who's Beth?" I asked.

"She's our sister—and she married somebody Dad didn't approve of, and he, basically, disowned her, and he hasn't seen her in years."

"Is it possible that he'd like to, now, at the end?" I asked. "Has he maybe mentioned Beth recently?"

"No, he never says her name" the oldest said, "but we all know he's sorry for what he said to her. He's just too stiff-necked to admit it. Dad can never admit he's wrong—it's like he's afraid people will think he's weak if he does, or something."

"This kind of estrangement can be a huge burden to bear," I said. "Your Dad might want to put this burden down now. He might want to reconcile with Beth."

Then the sisters argued about the possibility of this, but eventually decided it was at least worth calling Beth, to see what she thought. To their amazement, she agreed to come, and later that afternoon, she arrived at her father's bedside. We left her alone with him, and gathered in the waiting room. After awhile, Beth joined us.

"What did he do? What did you say?" the sisters asked.

"He didn't do anything. He just laid there," she said. She began to tear up as she said, "I just told him I forgave him, and I loved him, anyway, and that me and Dan are happy, and we're doing okay. And I prayed for him. I would've done that a long time ago, if he'd just called me. But I was afraid of what he'd say if I called *him*. Stubborn old man." Beth left then, and the rest of us went into their father's room. There was absolutely no change in him: he still lay in bed, breathing shallowly and evenly. The sisters looked at one another, and shrugged.

"Well, Dad, we tried," said the oldest.

"Yeah, and, you know, I think Beth will feel better after this," another said thoughtfully.

"And maybe your Dad will, too" I said.

A few minutes later, their father took his last breath, and was completely still. The sisters stood silently, looking at one another.

“Beth told him she loved him,” whispered the oldest. “Wonder how long he’s wanted to hear that.”

When I look back on this, I remember that Beth was afraid of what her father would say to her if she called him. And her Dad might have been afraid he would appear weak if he forgave her. A lot of times fear is what keeps us from loving. Fear of the unknown. Fear of what’s different. Fear of what others will think. Fear of failure. But to follow Jesus we need to work through our fear. Imagine how afraid Jesus was when he was telling his disciples these things; at this time, he was getting ready to die for love of them—to die for love of us.

“Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another.” Amen.

The Rev. Melanie K. Lewis  
Christ Church, Millwood