

“Everyone Will Know”

John 13: 31-35

Now this Scripture is not for our church. It is meant for other churches. You know, other churches where that notorious someone whispers in meetings about something he doesn't like, you know other churches where that notorious someone holds parking lot meetings rather than talking to the leadership about her concerns. This Scripture is not meant for our church. It is meant for other churches, other churches who can't get along. Sure, in those churches, everything looks all rosy on the surface, people smiling on Sunday mornings, greeting each other during Passing of the Peace but behind the scenes, it is ugly. Behind the scenes, there is gossip and hurt feelings. Behind the scenes, there are divisions and conflicts. Behind the scenes, there is a broken community that doesn't know how to love one another like Jesus loves them.

But that is not our church. So I'll be honest, I struggled on whether to even preach this Scripture since it clearly doesn't apply to us. But well...since it is in the Bible and we are here anyway, why don't we take a look at it, just in case...you know just in case we might need a reminder in the future of how we are called to act and be as a community that reflects the love and grace of Jesus.

Now let me say again, I'm not preaching to this church. This Scripture is for other churches. But as I said before, since we are here, let's take a look at what exactly John says in this text.

(Read the Scripture).

What would you say if I asked the question, "What is the hardest commandment in the Bible to follow for us as people of faith?" Would you answer me by telling me one of the commandments from the original top ten list? Or would you say that the hardest commandment to follow in the Bible is the one that tells us to love our enemies? How would you answer the question, "What is the hardest commandment in the Bible to follow?"

I bet it is safe to say that no one would answer this question with the commandment that is found within our text this week: "I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another." But I would argue that this is the hardest commandment to follow for us as people of faith.

Here's why I say this. As for the original top 10, well...you just "don't" meaning don't murder, don't lie, don't be mean to your mom and dad. As for loving our enemies, really...how many of us have to interact with our enemies daily? Usually our "enemies" are people from a different part of the globe, people we

don't have to see or interact with at all. They can simply be faceless and nameless entities that we can say we love without ever really having to test out that theory.

But loving one another...is hard. And loving one another as Jesus has loved us is even harder. Because "one another" indicates these are people we see every day, interact with every day. These are the people we go to church with every Sunday. These are the people we work together with to build up the Kingdom of God. And guess what... these are the people we are called to love as Jesus has loved us...the people who know us deeply, the people who have seen us through the worst and who have seen us through our best. These are the people we have broken bread with, cried with, laughed with, and worshiped with. These are the people we are in relationship with as brothers and sisters in faith. And, let's be honest... sometimes these are the very people it is hard to love as Jesus loves....well, because we know each other so well. We know what buttons to push. We know the hot topics to bring up if we want to pick a fight. With our brothers and sisters in faith, the very ones we are in deep relationship with, we know just what to say to make them mad.

And yes, as frustrating as it is, as maddening as it is, these are the people we are called to love as Jesus loves, the people we interact with every day, people who are our co-workers, our family, or our fellow church members. As frustrating as it

is at times, we are in relationship with these people. We are in community with these people. And let's face it, we couldn't get away from them if we tried.

Sure, we may have the option of changing jobs or leaving churches- and yes please hear me say, that sometimes this is the best option for our mental and spiritual well being. I would never deny that. But...on the other hand, how many times have people simply left the church or broken ties with their family because someone did something to make them mad. I'll take this bit of silence as confirmation.

When we break ties with the very people we are called to be in relationship with simply because we are mad about something, all we do is wound the Body of Christ more. No one really wins. Even if we do leave, all because someone said something that made us mad or because we disagree with others over politics or hot topic issues, even if we leave, all this does is spread the hurt out to a wider circle, bringing in others to the pain and division actions and words have created. Which simply means that in the long run, the Kingdom of God is pushed off once again from becoming a reality here on Earth.

I was somewhat joking earlier when I started this sermon but not really. I will not deny that as a church, we have not had our share of disagreements and yes, even arguments. I also will not deny that within our history as a congregation, that

there haven't been splits where people have left over issues in the church. But thankfully, our story as a community of faith doesn't end at these places. The church was able to move beyond those moments. We were able to rediscover the mission and ministry that God was calling this congregation to as a people of God. And I think a lot of that goes back to the very words of this commandment: calling us to love one another as Jesus has loved us. Not that we had everything figured out. We simply realized that there was more at stake than us sitting in these pews. We realized that the very essence of the Kingdom of God was at stake in these splits and conflicts.

Let me explain: As we read this commandment, we need to put it in context. These verses do not stand alone. They are part of a wider story, a story that centers around Jesus' last night with his disciples.

In the verses just before our text, as you may remember Jesus washes the disciples feet. He tells them that he has given them an example of how they are to serve one another, reminding them that they are called to be servants for the Kingdom of God. Then immediately following this servant example, Jesus foretells his betrayal at the hand of his disciples. This conversation about betrayal is followed by the new commandment given in our text today. Then interestingly enough, what follows this new commandment to love one another is Jesus' acknowledgment that Peter will deny him three times.

Just take a moment and think about that. Even as Jesus is telling his disciples that they are called to love one another, he knows, he knows that one will betray him, one will deny him and the rest will scattered into the night. Jesus knows that he is dealing with imperfect, broken, very real, very human people. And in spite of that or maybe I should say, because of that, Jesus tells them to love each other as he has loved them.

The key part being as Jesus has loved them. Time and time again he has showed them what it means to be in relationship with one another. Time and time again he has preached to them about recognizing the image of God found in every single person. Time and time again through his words and his action, Jesus has shown them that love is not a feeling. It is a way of being. It is a way of doing. It is a way speaking.

This is not a naïve commandment, where one pretends that everything is sunshine and rainbows, where we simply pretend to actually like each other. This commandment calls us to do some hard work, the hard work of the Kingdom of God, the hard work of bringing healing and wholeness, reconciliation and justice to all of God's creation. And this hard work starts right here, in this community of faith, with the ones sitting in the pews beside us.

This commandment calls us to realize that if we can't love the very people we are in the deepest relationship with, how on earth is this world supposed to believe us when we offer them the grace and love of God?

You see, there is a lot at stake for us when Jesus gives us this new commandment. No, nothing like our membership rolls or budgets or even the programs of our individual churches. What is at stake is the very essence of the Kingdom of God. How can we expect to help build the Kingdom of God here on Earth when we can't even offer it or share it with one another?

Too many times in talking to people outside the walls of the church, the biggest reason they will not cross the doors of a church is because of the "hypocrites" inside the walls of the church. Those within the walls are the first to criticize others, be snobbish, and downright rude to each other. No one wants to be a part of that. There are too many other options out there for spending a Sunday morning anymore.

But there is a real need for community in our world. People want to be connected with others. People need to be in relationship with others. I fully admit it is hard work being in relationship, being in community with others but it is so worth it. Because who else is willing to listen to you when you have questions about life or faith? Who else is going to walk with you as we journey through life,

going through all its ups and downs? Who else is going to look beyond our hurts, beyond the labels placed upon us by the world and see us as who we were created to be...as ones made in the image of God and loved more than we could ever imagine?

Now, please don't hear me say that we are going to get this loving one another as Jesus loves us perfect every time. Because we are not. We are human, real, grumpy, ornery, broken, humans and this orneriness spills over into our relationships from time to time. What I am suggesting we do when this happens is to realize that "Love should be the distinguishing mark of our Church. It should be the characteristic of our life together by which even outsiders can discern our authenticity." Not because it is this right thing to do. Not because it is the Christian thing to do. Love should be the distinguishing mark of our life together as people of faith because that is what Jesus showed us when he gave his life so that we might live.

It is only through living out our love for one another as a community that the whole world will know and experience the grace and love of God.

It is fascinating to think that when it comes to loving one another as communities of faith there are more examples of what not to do rather than what we should do. It is also telling that for this sermon illustration on how to love one

another as Jesus loves us I had to go outside of the church world to the world of a nursing home to find it.

In Finland, most young adults move out at the age of 18 but due to the high cost of living, many cannot find a place to live so they wind up homeless on the streets. Amazingly enough, someone had the brilliant idea to offer rooms in nursing homes at subsidized rates to these young adults, on the condition that they socialize with the residents. It seems like such an odd combination, two groups that have nothing in common, so much so that you would think this idea would be a failure. But it is not. It is growing around that country as a way to solve the homeless youth problem and to increase the well-being of the elderly population.

Here's why: In one story about this experiment, one young man shared that he was making sweet rolls one day and decided to invite his neighbor over for some. He said, "This isn't like other apartments where you can just ignore your neighbors. These are people that we interact every day. So my neighbor came over and we ate together. We learned each other stories. We realized that the gap between the young and old was not that big to prevent us from getting along, from preventing us from interacting with each other. We want everyone to see what is happening here in this nursing home so that everyone will know that this community thing is a good thing."

Like I said, I know that this sermon is not for those of us sitting in these pews but maybe just maybe you know just in case we might need a reminder in the future of how we are called to act and be as a community that reflects the love and grace of Jesus, maybe just maybe we can remember this commandment to love one another as Jesus loves us so that all the world can see that this being together as a community of faith is a good thing. Amen.