

May 2, 2010

Scripture: John 13: 31-35

Sermon: "Have Love for One Another"

We hear these words from the Gospel of John and immediately our minds think "Do unto to others as you would have them do to you" or "Love your neighbor as yourself". And maybe we say to ourselves, "we've heard this before. And maybe we say to ourselves, " this really isn't a new commandment. And maybe we say to ourselves "We already live this out. We already practice this. We've heard this before."

And I will tell, that's where I was at the beginning of the week. When I sat down on Monday to begin preparing for this sermon, my first thought was this isn't new. As people of faith, we've heard this before. As a preacher of the Good News, I've preached this before. As a community of faith, we do this already.

And I began reflecting on this passage, I realized that all through our Scriptures in some form or another, this is basic message: Do unto others as you would have them do unto you. Love your neighbors as yourself . From the giving of the 10 commandments, to the laws found in Leviticus, from all the Gospels to Paul's letter to the Corinthians with the chapter known as the "love" chapter, in some form or another, the message of love is there: love for our neighbors, love for the outcast, love for the poor, love for the sick, and love for all of God's children. All through our Scriptures, the challenge is there: loving all despite not agreeing on beliefs and practices, loving all and recognizing the image of God found in all of God's children, loving all even when we want to draw lines and ask questions about who is in and who is out.

So why do we need another sermon on loving one another? Why do we need another Scripture telling us to love one another? Why do we need another book of the Bible reminding us to love one another?

We understand and try to practice love in all that we do. We try to let this basic message of love be our centering point in our faith. So why is this new? Why is John sharing this verse as if he has some ground breaking, life-changing message? Why is this a New Commandment even though it is really not a "new"?

For the answer to these questions and for us to really understand John's meaning behind this new commandment, we as people of faith must take a step back and see the big picture, see the big scene that surrounds this new commandment.

And when we do this, we find ourselves on the night in which Jesus was betrayed. Jesus has gathered all the disciples in the upper room and he invites them to the table. He knows what lies ahead. He knows what tomorrow will bring. He knows that one of those closest to him will betray him. Jesus knows that the one he knows as Peter, friend, disciples, always impetuous, always impulsive, always ready to follow along, will deny him three times before the morning light breaks. He knows that when the guards come to take him away that all his disciples will scatter. He also knows that while he is hanging on the cross, looking out on the crowd, his disciples, those closest to him will not be there.

On that night, in the upper room, Jesus knows that darkness is closing in and threatening to break the bonds of the community of believers.

In spite of knowing all these things, Jesus invites his disciples to break bread with him. Despite all these things, Jesus welcomes his disciples to the table. And because of all these things, he tries to prepare them for what lies ahead, letting them know that they will not be alone, showing them love, showing them grace, showing them the true meaning of love. During this meal, he gently washes all the disciples' feet and says: "This is how you will show the world God's love for them. As disciples, all of you will be servant leaders, tending to the hurts, serving all of God's children, celebrating that the power of love is found in its generous nature. During the meal, Jesus takes a loaf of bread and says, "This is my body broken for you. This is the cup of the new covenant for you. As often as you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes."

During this meal, Jesus invites all his disciples to the table, welcomes all his disciples to God's table, even the one who would deny him, even the one who would betray him. He invites all his disciples to the table to experience God's love and God's grace. Despite the broken promises, despite the betrayal, despite the broken relationships, Jesus invites them to the table, all the disciples to God's table, welcomes all the disciples to the table to experience grace, to experience unity, to show them how much he loves them.

Because despite the betrayals, despite the denials, despite the broken relationships, Jesus loves them, love them even to the end. Jesus loves them all. Jesus loves them in spite of their betraying actions, in spite of their hurtful words, and in spite of their expressions of denial. Jesus loves them completely, unconditionally, wholly. Jesus sees beyond all those things and sees them as a child of God, recognizes that they are connected, and recognizes that he is responsible to and for his brothers and sisters. Jesus sees beyond all these divisions and celebrates that he loves them by inviting them to share in the bread and the cup with him. Everyone was welcomed, the believers, the doubters, the betrayers, the ones that would deny him, the ones that scattered, the ones who watched from a distance. All were welcomed.

And that is what John means when he shares "This is a new commandment: Love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another."

John wants us as people of faith to ask ourselves "How did Jesus love us? He died on the cross for you and for me. John wants us to continue to ask: How does Jesus continue love us? He sees all of us as beautiful, named and claimed children of God.

John wants us to think about the first time we heard those beautiful simple words: "Jesus loves me, this I know, for the Bible tells me so." John would agree with us when we say that this commandment is not new, it is not a new teaching, it is not a new rule of faith. He would also say that What is new about this commandment is "how we are shaped by the life and death of Jesus Christ", how we are shaped by Jesus' example, how we are shaped by the love that Jesus showed for us as his followers. We've heard the words before and now we have the example. Now we understand how far love will go and does go. Now we understand how we are to love one

another by following Jesus' example. We are to love another despite the betrayals, despite the hurt words, despite the broken relationships. We are to love as Jesus loves us, completely, unconditionally, wholly.

Despite the walls we put up, despite the broken relationships between our communities of faith, despite the denials that we sometimes bring, John says that Jesus loves us and will continue to love us to the end, completely, unconditionally, wholly, and that is the love that we are called to reflect, to live out as disciples of Christ, to live out as the Body of Christ here on earth.

And what better news to bring or what better example to share with a world that is hurting, broken, divided and that is in need of grace and love right now.

When John shares these words with his community and with us as modern day readers he is giving us a powerful message. He wants us to understand "that the love that exists in the Christian community is an integral part of [our] community's witness. Simply put...the outside world, the outside community, "they will know we are Christians by our love...for each other and for the world because we are called to love as Jesus loved us, no boundaries, no borders, no exclusions.

Simply put... when we don't love as Jesus loves us, even within our own communities of faith, even within our own families of faith, we are not living as God intended or being the people that God created us to be. We are not one in the Spirit. We are not one in the Lord. We are one in the unity that we hope will one day be restored. We are not one as the Body of Christ and we are not living out our calling to reflect God's love for all of God's children.

The lesson that John shares with his readers, then and now, is that we must be a community. We must take care of one another. We must show this world that there is more than this world can offer, that our God is still working, and that our God has the last word. The lesson that John shares with his readers, then and now, is that we as the church are the model, we are the "saving reach of God's love in this world, we are the Body of Christ here on earth, full of love, full of grace, full of hope. No boundaries, no borders, no exclusions.

The lesson that John shares with his readers, then and now, is that he wants us to understand that the funny thing about the Body of Christ is that " as the body, as the example, as the saving reaching of God's love, we cannot go out and love the world without the support of a community, [without the support of each other} wherein we are loved as Christ loves us. We need that community to survive. It is crucial for us to know that someone out there loves us. On the other hand, the community does not exist in and for itself alone. The church is the community where the love of God takes shape for the sake of the Word, for the sake of the wider community of which the Christian community is a part." Simply put...we need each other. Simply put if the outside world looks at the Body of Christ and all it sees are divisions, broken relationships, hurt, and separation, then we have not fulfilled our calling: we have not loved as Jesus loved us and we are not loving as Jesus loves us.

It is only when we love one another as Jesus loves us, no boundaries, no borders, no exclusions, it is only when we let go of the hurt and angry words, it is only when we realize that we need

each other, that we find fullness as persons, as communities and as agents of change. When we say that we love one another as Jesus loves us, we are not sharing a “cheap love but a love that seeks to understand and embrace the “other”, that welcomes diversity, that affirms the gifts” of all of God’s children as part of the Body of Christ.

When John says that this is a new commandment, he is calling us to “let our love spiral forth to include and to grow, to unify the Body of Christ, to show that our God is still working in this world.

When John says that this is a new commandment, we are to remember how Jesus loves us, no boundaries, no exclusions, no exceptions and to live out our calling to go out into this world that is broken and hurting, that is filled with people who are hungry and dying , that is filled with People who are lost and lonely, that is filled with people who are oppressed by the power, that is need of the Good News: that they are loved, not because we have to love them, not because it is the right thing to do. No we say that all of us are loved because simply put...God first loved us completely, wholly, and unconditionally. We say that we are loved because simply put.. God sent Jesus, God’s only Son, into the world to love. We say that we are loved because simply put... we are claimed and named as God’s own Beloved.

all connected, part of the one Body of Christ, filled with the same love, the same peace, the same grace of God.

John’s lesson for us this morning is Simply put...we are called to show that we are Christians by our love for another because God first loved us.

Yes, we’ve heard this before. Yes, we’ve preached this before. Yes, we try to live this out in our lives.

But our world is still hurting. Our world is still divided. Our world is still broken.

And that is why we need to hear another message, another sermon, another reminder of the Good News.

Jesus Loves us. This we know.

Now let us love one another as Jesus loves us.

May we never tire of hearing this Good News. Amen.