

“Love One Another”

John 13: 31-35

Before I begin, I want to clarify...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 who doesn't know how to love one another like Jesus loves them.

But let me be clear...that is not our church which is why I struggled deciding 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 which reflects the love and grace of Jesus in all things, and in all circumstances.

(Read the Scripture).

How would you respond to the question: “What is the hardest commandment in the Bible for us to follow as people of faith?” Would you respond 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 respond to the question, “What is the hardest commandment in the Bible to follow?”

I bet it is safe to say that no one would respond with the commandment found within our text today: "I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another." However, I argue that this is the hardest commandment for us to follow 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 steal. 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 whom we can say in theory we love without ever really having to put it into practice, you know just the

way we like it. Please sense the sarcasm here. We could get into this, given what's going on in our world, in our nation today. But that's a different sermon for a different day. And I know that I am already stepping on enough toes with this particular sermon as it is.

So back to this loving one another. It 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, the people who have seen us through our best. These are the people we have broken bread with, cried with, laughed with, and worshiped with on a regular basis. 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 so 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 want 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, our co-

workers, our family, 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 can'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 that is the best option for our mental and spiritual well being. I would never deny that. But...just hear me out, on the flip side of this conversation...how many stories have you heard about people who have left the church or broke ties with their family simply because someone did something to make them mad. And I'm not talking about real life important issues, I'm talking about getting mad over the color of the paint used in the women's bathroom, I'm talking about getting mad because they didn't like the way someone looked at them at the dinner table. 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, we wound the Body of Christ more. No one really wins. It simply spreads the hurt out to a wider circle, bringing in others to the pain and division our actions have created.

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

recent, within our history, as a congregation, I will not deny that there have been splits where people have left over issues in the church. But thankfully, our story as a community of faith didn't end at these places. The church was able to move beyond those moments. We were able to rediscover the mission and ministry to which God was calling this congregation 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 have everything figured out. We simply realized that there was more at stake than just us sitting in these pews. We realized that the very essence of the Kingdom of God was at stake in these splits and conflicts. And it all goes back to this commandment, a commandment which does not stand alone, a commandment which is not just feel good words. It all goes back to this commandment which is part of the wider story of Jesus's 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 being Jesus' disciple 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 being Jesus' disciple 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 is a commandment which calls us to do some hard work, the hard work of the Kingdom of God, the hard work of bringing healing and wholeness, the hard work

of reconciliation and justice for 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 with whom we are in the deepest relationship, how on earth is this world supposed to believe us when we offer them the grace and love of God? Or as someone who is way smarter than me said: Anyone can find God while sitting alone on the mountaintop. The miracle and yes, what we are called to do is to find God in the company of people who are as annoying and as grumpy as we are ourselves.

You see, too many times in talking with 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. And I will be the first to admit that 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 will spill over into our relationships from time to time. No, what I am suggesting we do when this orneriness does spill over 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.

But 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 ever need a reminder in the future, a reminder of how we are called to act and be as a community who reflects the love and grace of Jesus in all things, in all circumstances, on the off chance we need a reminder of who we are called to be as Jesus' disciples, maybe just maybe we will 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. May it be so. Amen.