

Sermon Easter 5 C 2016

It was the night Jesus had gathered with his disciples for a meal—the night before the Passover. He had just washed the feet of twelve men as yet another way of showing them how he loved them. At some point after he had washed and dried Judas' feet, Jesus took a piece of bread and dipped it in the dish and handed it to Judas, who then immediately got up and left the table and went out into the night. None of the disciples understood what he was going to do. Only Jesus knew that Judas, whose feet he had just washed in an act of love, was going out to betray him. When he had gone out, Jesus began to talk about being glorified, but this is not the kind of glory any of them recognized or understood yet, for it involved betrayal, suffering and dying on a cross.

Jesus knew that he would be leaving. He wanted to help his friends cope with the grief and loss they had no way of understanding would be coming their way. He speaks to them tenderly and with great affection, calling these grown men little children. “Dearest friends, you will look for me and where I am going you aren't able to come”. He is gentle and helpful to them, and it seems enigmatic. They don't understand. So, he gives them something they CAN understand: A new commandment. Love one another. As I have loved you, you are to love one another.

A. If the followers of Jesus already had a commandment to love one another, why did they need a new one? You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against any of your people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself: I am the LORD. Lev. 19:18

The disciples needed a new commandment to love one another because up until now, Jesus had been there to do the loving, and now he was going. It was up to them to do it now.

Jesus had been with them all this time in order to show them how God loved them and to live that out with them, day in and day out. He had called them. Jesus had chosen them to be with him, and since that time, they were discovering together that it was not about who was the greatest, or who could earn the position of best disciple. They were learning that it was all about the power of God's love to transform lives.

Not only had their own lives been changed by hanging around Jesus, but they had witnessed how the man born blind had gained his vision. They were there when the paralyzed man by the pool took up his mat and walked home. They saw him talking with people he was not supposed to be hanging out with like women and Gentiles. They saw him walking on water and feeding thousands and heard him speaking words of eternal life. They witnessed him forgiving a woman caught in adultery and even bringing his friend Lazarus back to life from the dead. The power of love at work in Jesus was amazing, and now he was asking them to put that love into action for each other because he was not going to be there to do it for them.

B. How was the commandment Jesus was giving them new?

The newness of this commandment is that Jesus is not asking the disciples to simply imitate him. He is asking them to draw on the love they have received from him and to put it into action. The key phrase here is “Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another”. Each disciple is then referred directly to the question: how has Jesus loved me? What has Jesus done for me? How has Jesus put his love into action for me? Each of the disciples could have answered something like this:

He wanted me, desired my friendship, invited me to join him in his mission, shared everything with me, taught me everything he knew about his Father, the Scripture and prayer both by word and example, gave me a share in accomplishing his work, and gave me his life.

Even without Jesus physically present, each disciple would have felt honored, respected, and able to carry out this very difficult commandment to love one another as Jesus loved them because they knew how much Jesus loved them. To love one another in this way is hard. It is not just a warm fuzzy feeling. It is the work of going out of our way even when we don't feel like it. Loving as Jesus loves means laying down our lives for one another and going out of our way to put our love into action. Loving in this way is only possible if we rely on Jesus' love to love through our love.

Loving in this way means honoring one another with all our differences. It means forgiving one another when we'd rather be right. It means going back a second time to listen even if the first time we got hurt. It means supporting one another in times of financial difficulty. It means holding one another up when jobs are lost or when the job climate is crushing the spirit. It means holding one another in the sacred space where God says, "See, I am making all things new", where we refuse to limit each other by the labels we are tempted to give to each other. In essence, it means taking the time to think about every potential human interaction, "what is the most loving thing to do for this person, even if I have never done it before... even if I don't know them very well," and to grow our church from relationships marked by our intentional loving practices repeated over and over with the love of Jesus fueling all of us.

We need this new commandment because loving one another as Jesus loved us is hard. We need to be reminded that 1st, we are chosen, loved, and sent out into the world. 2nd we are supposed to share this love even though it is hard. 3rd Jesus is right here in our hearts making it possible for us to put that love into practice. 4th, we have been given practices for getting closer to God and Jesus so his love can flow through us to others. These practices are personal prayer, the Eucharist, reading the Bible, service, and getting into conversations with each other about our faith. And finally it is by the quality of our lives that others will want to know what is so special about this community called St. Matthew's. "By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another."