

**“Love One Another,” based on John 13:31-35**  
**A sermon preached by the Rev. Elizabeth Smith-Bartlett**  
**At The Larchmont Avenue Church**  
**May 19, 2019**  
**Confirmation Sunday**

**John 13:31-35**

<sup>31</sup>When he had gone out, Jesus said, “Now the Son of Man has been glorified, and God has been glorified in him.

<sup>32</sup>If God has been glorified in him, God will also glorify him in himself and will glorify him at once.

<sup>33</sup>Little children, I am with you only a little longer. You will look for me; and as I said to the Jews so now I say to you, ‘Where I am going, you cannot come.’

<sup>34</sup>I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another.

<sup>35</sup>By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.”

(This is the Word of the Lord...**Thanks be to God**)

I.

Confirmands, today is your day.

We are proud of your work this year,

we are inspired by your expressions of faith,  
we are better for having you in our midst.

Today marks a special moment in your lives,  
and we are honored to be part of this moment with you.

This moment is a distinct moment in your faith journeys,  
but I hope that it is also a distinct moment in your life journeys,  
a moment that you are connecting your faith with your life--

with who you are and who you are becoming,  
with how you are part of the world  
and how you want to go forward into the world.

Because this faith that we profess and practice in here  
doesn't matter that much  
if it doesn't guide and support our lives  
that we lead out there.

Many of you are already thinking about the future--  
about your passions and curiosities  
and what you might study in college.  
Many of you are already thinking about  
what your future vocations might be.

I use the word vocation on purpose,  
because a vocation is more than just a job or profession.

A vocation is a calling.  
A vocation recognizes that our faith journey  
and our life journey are deeply connected.

Theologian and writer Frederick Buechner  
describes vocation this way:

*"The place God calls you to  
is the place where your deep gladness  
and the world's deep hunger meet."*<sup>1</sup>

Friends, that can be anywhere.  
Your deep gladness and the world's deep hunger can meet

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<sup>1</sup> Frederick Buechner, "Vocation" in Wishful Thinking: A Seeker's ABC revised and expanded (Harper San Francisco, 1993), 119.

in classrooms and courtrooms  
and operating rooms and boardrooms.

They can meet in Manhattan or Milwaukee or Malawi.  
They can meet in a kitchen or a cubicle,  
the Senate or a studio,  
a shelter or a sanctuary.

But they do not meet automatically.

And they can only meet if we are guided by one thing,  
and that one thing is love.

II.

And not just any love,  
but the kind of love that Jesus practiced in community.

*I give you a new commandment,  
that you 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."*

In this farewell address to his disciples,  
just before he is arrested,  
Jesus gives these final instructions.

This is the only commandment that Jesus gives explicitly to his disciples  
and insists that they keep.

And I think it's because he knows that for all of us,

one of our deepest hungers is to belong,  
to be part of a community that values and loves us.

I think it's because he knows that one of our deepest gladnesses is being seen and being known and being found.

And he knows that the lives that we lead out there  
must be guided and supported  
by the faith that we profess and practice in here.

Notice what Jesus doesn't say here.

The new commandment isn't to speak about our faith  
only when we are certain of it.

The new commandment isn't to be the purest of the pure  
or the holiest of the holy.

The new commandment isn't to convert as many people as possible to Christianity.

The new commandment isn't even to attend church every Sunday,  
or read the Bible regularly,  
or pray every day.

And it's not that these other things don't matter,  
because they do.

How we talk about God and how we express our beliefs matter.

How we engage with this ancient tradition,  
with Scripture, with prayer matters.

These things matter deeply.

It's just that Jesus trusts that by living into the command to love the way that Jesus has loved us, we will sort everything else out one way or the other.

III.

So what does this love look like?

It looks like boundary-breaking grace.  
It looks like Mercy.

On a rainy morning in February, a group of us from LAC arrived at Mercy Community Church in Atlanta<sup>2</sup> not really knowing what to expect.

Our youth mission team had heard that this was a church that welcomed those experiencing homelessness, but that was about all that we knew as we wandered in out of the drizzly cold.

About 20 people, mostly men, were already there in the orange and purple main room, warming up and drinking coffee.

Some were chatting with one another, others kept to themselves, standing or sitting in chairs that were set up in two concentric circles around the room.

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<sup>2</sup> <https://mercyatl.org>

A quick glance let us know  
that a breakfast of eggs and grits and sausage  
was being made in a kitchenette towards the back.

Off of the kitchenette was a well-stocked pantry.  
Above our heads and around the room were prayer flags,  
each with the name and picture of a community member,  
some present at the church with us that day  
and others who had joined the church triumphant.

We were greeted by Pastor Brittany,  
who told us about Mercy Church's ministry  
and invited us grab a cup of coffee and a seat  
so that we could start getting to know those gathered,  
and we quickly realized that our service for the day  
was not serving a meal or organizing a closet,  
but being in full community with the women and men  
of Mercy Church.

Over the course of our time at Mercy Church,  
we studied Scripture together--  
rather than preaching a sermon,  
Pastor Brittany engages those gathered in group study--  
"You are all theologians, and you all have something to teach us" she said.  
The text that day?  
"Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God."

We made art together,  
creating collages using scrapbook paper, scissors, and glue.

Together we ate our lunches and shared conversation,  
realizing our shared interests in things  
like music and sports and travel.

We heard stories of the struggles of life on the street  
and gratitude for places where one could feel truly welcome.

And together we sang:  
*And they'll know we are Christians by our love, by our love/  
yes they'll know we are Christians by our love.*

For a good portion of that morning,  
I was seated in the back corner of the room,  
fighting back tears  
because I was so overwhelmed by the grace  
that fills the walls of Mercy Church.

But just as overwhelming to me was the grace shown by our youth who were so  
fully present and living into the reality  
of the kingdom of God in our midst.

*Love one another.  
Just as I have loved you,  
you also should love one another.*

IV.

What does this love look like?

It looks like having the humility to be changed  
and even transformed by God's love.

Rachel Held Evans was a Christian writer  
who died unexpectedly earlier this month  
at the age of 37.

As news of her death started to spread,  
tribute after tribute poured forth  
from both colleagues and critics alike.

They said that Rachel was deeply authentic.  
That she used her voice and her power  
to help lift up voices and experiences  
of those often marginalized by the church.

That she generously practiced the all-inclusive love  
that she pointed to in her writing.

In a blogpost from 2016,  
Rachel recalled the graduation speech she gave  
at her own Bible college graduation,  
which was all about changing the world,  
and said that if she had it to do all over again,  
she would include a challenge to her class  
to let the world change them too.

Because that's exactly what happened after I descended that platform, [she  
writes]  
and walked into a world inhabited not by ...straw figures [...]  
but by flesh-and-blood human beings  
who didn't stick to the atheist/ Muslim/  
feminist/gay/  
liberal/poor/skeptic/foreigner script,



a world less characterized by black and white certainties than by mile after  
mile and year after year  
of thick, impenetrable gray.

I thought I was called to challenge the atheists,  
but the atheists ended up challenging me.

I thought God wanted to use me  
to show gay people how to be straight.

Instead God used gay people to show me  
how to be Christian.

And lest you think I count myself finished [she continues],  
know this: When I was a Bible-thumping, church-going,  
know-it-all Republican, God used bleeding-heart, politically-correct,  
question-everything liberals  
to teach me to be human,  
to challenge my notions of who the enemy is.

But now that I'm a bleeding-heart, politically-correct, question-everything  
liberal,

God insists on using Bible-thumping, church-going, know-it-all Republicans  
to teach me to be human, to challenge my notions  
of who the enemy is.<sup>3</sup>

Beloved, God's love is greater than anything  
we could ever imagine.

And so if we are to point to it,  
we need one another's help.

But what's more,

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<sup>3</sup> <https://rachelheldevans.com/blog/commencement-do-over-world-change-you>

if Jesus calls us to live lives thoroughly shaped  
 by a love that knows no limits,  
 then who are we to limit who has something to teach us  
 about that love,  
 and who is included in that love?

*Love one another.  
 Just as I have loved you,  
 you also should love one another.*

V.

What does this love look like?

It looks like courage to stand up and speak out--  
 courage not just to go to church, but to be the church--  
 because the world is watching.

*By this everyone will know that you are my disciples,  
 if you have love for one another.*

Author Debie Thomas comments:

I can't speak for you, but this makes *me* tremble.  
 What Jesus seems to be saying  
 is that if we fail to love one another,  
 the world *won't* know what it needs to know about God,  
 and in the terrible absence of that knowing,  
 it will believe falsehoods that break God's heart.  
 [Falsehoods like] the whole Jesus thing is a sham.  
 That there really is no transformative power in the resurrection.  
 That God is a mean, angry, vindictive parent,  
 determined only to shame and punish [us] children.

That the universe is a cold, meaningless place,  
ungoverned by love.

That the Church is only a flawed and hypocritical institution--  
not Christ's living, breathing, healing body on earth.

Such is the power we wield [she reminds us]  
in our decisions to love or not love.

Such are the stakes involved in how we choose to respond to Jesus' dying [...] commandment.

Such is the responsibility we shoulder,  
whether we want to or not.<sup>4</sup>

The church's vocation must be love,  
Jesus-shaped love.

Love that goes out into the world to weep with those who weep, love that stands  
shoulder to shoulder in solidarity,

love that seeks out those who are cast aside,  
left behind, overlooked.

Love that humbles itself to wash another's feet,  
to repent and forgive,

to admit when we have wandered  
and are in need of change.

Love that is actively working for justice  
with communities of color,

with women, with LGBTQ folx,  
with our friends without homes,  
with immigrants and refugees,

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<sup>4</sup> <https://www.journeywithjesus.net/essays/2216-if-you-love>

with any and every community that finds itself disenfranchised.

Love that does not shy away  
 from the world's deepest hungers but meets them,  
 embraces them, transforms them  
 with God's deepest gladness and calls us to do the same,  
 pointing to God's love that will never give up,  
 never run out,  
 never ever let any of us go.

VI.

Pastor and activist William Sloane Coffin  
 often used these words as benediction--  
 confirmands and congregation, today they are our charge.

May these words bless you this day and always:

May the Lord bless you and keep you.  
 May the Lord's face shine upon you and be gracious unto you.  
 May God give you grace not to sell yourselves short,  
 grace to risk something big for something good,  
 grace to remember that the world is now too dangerous for anything but truth  
 and too small for anything but love.  
 May God take your minds and think through them.  
 May God take your lips and speak through them.  
 May God take your hands and work through them.  
 May God take your hearts and set them on fire.  
 Amen.

