

## “Jesus’ New Commandment”

John 13:31-35, Acts 11:1-18

Sunday, May 2, 2010—Fifth Sunday in Easter

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As we continue to ask ourselves, during this Easter season, what it means to be disciples of Jesus Christ, this morning’s reading provides another flashback, to the last night of Jesus’ life. Jesus knows his hour has come. Knowing that he will be on earth for only a little while longer, he spend his final hours blessing those who have been closest to him, and getting them ready for his departure. So he has washed their feet and told them: “I have set you an example so that you should do as I have done for you.” He has predicted Judas’ betrayal. And then he offers his new commandment: “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.”

Now at first glance, this commandment doesn’t sound particularly new. A lot of Christians don’t realize it, but Jesus was not the first one to command love of neighbor as the way of life for God’s people. The Torah, the holy book of the Jewish people long before Christ came, commands: “You shall love your neighbor as yourself” (Leviticus 19:18). What’s new here is the words Jesus adds at the end: “Love one another **as I have loved you.**”

If we want to love as Jesus does, it follows that we first need to understand how he loves. Let’s start by naming some common misconceptions about love, Jesus style. First, we think love has to do with our feelings. This is a cultural understanding, not a Biblical one. Jesus’ way of loving has nothing to do with feelings. Our calling in Christ is not to feel warm and fuzzy about everyone, as though that were even possible. When Jesus commanded us to love one another, he was talking about actions, not feelings. And he made clear that the kind of love he is talking about is most apparent, not in the way we are with those we feel warm and fuzzy about, but in the way we are with those we really can’t stand. Here’s how Jesus puts it in Eugene Peterson’s translation: “Here is a simple rule of thumb for behavior: Ask yourself what you want people to do for you; then grab the initiative and do it for them! If you love only the lovable, do you expect a pat on the back? Run of the mill sinners do that. If you only help those who help you, do you expect a medal? Garden variety sinners do that...I tell you, love your enemies. Help and give without expecting a return. You’ll never—I promise—regret it. Live out this God created identity the way our Father lives towards us, generously and graciously, even when we’re at our worst.” (Luke 6:31-36)

Second misconception: Loving means being nice. If what we mean by “being nice” is never saying or doing anything that anyone else might disagree with, or that might cause anyone to be upset, it’s clear that Jesus was not concerned with being nice. Listen in on his words to the good religious people of his day, again as Eugene Peterson translates them: “I’ve had it with you! You’re hopeless! Frauds!...You keep meticulous account books, tithing on every nickel and dime you get, but on the meat of God’s law, things like fairness and compassion and commitment—the absolute basics!—you carelessly take it or leave it. Do you have any idea how silly you look?” (Matthew 23:23-24) Or how about these words he spoke to the crowds in his sermon on the plain in Luke’s Gospel: “It’s trouble ahead if you’re satisfied with yourself. Your self will not satisfy you for long...There’s trouble ahead when you live only for the approval of others,

saying what flatters them, doing what indulges them...your task is to be true, not popular.” (Luke 6:24-25, 26).

Do you see why Jesus was killed? It wasn't because he was nice.

Third misconception: Loving means accepting every sort of bad behavior in other people, with a sweet, self-effacing smile. This one is easy. You all know how Jesus turned the tables over on the money changers in the temple. You know how he told the woman caught in adultery, “Go your way, and from now on do not sin again” (John 8:11). He never hesitated to confront bad behavior. He understood that loving people means something more than just allowing them to continue on a self-destructive path because it's their right to be self-destructive. He understood that sometimes the most loving thing we can do for one another is to expect each other to act like what we are, children of God.

So how did Jesus love people? Well for starters, he loved individuals, in all their individuality. Jesus understood that no one wants to be a category or stereotype or symbol. This is something pastors understand, because a lot of folks tend to think of us as some sort of unique species. They imagine we've never heard a swear word in our lives, much less ever spoken one. They figure that, since we're so close to God and all, we must be the only people in the world who never get angry, impatient, exhausted or discouraged. We must be the only people in the world who never do things we feel terrible about. Of course, this is no more true of pastors than it would be of bricklayers, nurses, plumbers or anyone else. Jesus understood that. He saw people as whole people, and he loved them just that way. He knew that “No one is good but God alone,” but he also knew that no one is beyond his power to redeem and save.

Jesus also understood that no one wants to be defined by their weakness or deficiency, whatever it might be; no one wants to be a cause or a problem to be fixed. Jesus invited everyone into relationship with him. Often those he invited were the people no one else wanted anything to do with, the lepers, the blind, the demon-possessed. Everyone thought these people must have done something bad to bring their problems on themselves. No one wanted to catch whatever their defect was, whether it was plain old bad health or bad morals to match. Jesus saw past that. He saw the person behind the disease, the individual behind the stereotype, the child of God behind the history of sordid behavior. It's how we all want to be seen, isn't it? Jesus didn't look down on those who were hurting and suffering. He never said they didn't deserve his help because they'd brought their troubles on themselves. Instead, he came alongside people as a fellow human being. He knew that ultimately it is loving acceptance, not judgment and criticism, that has the power to change and heal.

Love one another as I have loved you, he said. Jesus was speaking to his disciples. He was talking specifically about how Christians relate to other Christians, but the Christian Gospel is about much more than how we inside the church relate to each other. That point is made clear in this morning's reading from the book of Acts. Peter has a bizarre vision in which God tells him it's OK to eat all kinds of animals, even the ones that were forbidden under the Jewish purity rules. And as the story unfolds, it becomes clear that God has given Peter a message not just about food, but about people. In those days, Gentiles, or non-Jews, were outsiders. Jews didn't eat with them, didn't talk with them, didn't shake hands with them, didn't socialize with them. For the most part, Jews didn't even consider the possibility that God's love might be for

Gentiles, too. In effect, God tells Peter, because of Jesus Christ, the old rules dividing people into insiders and outsiders no longer apply. In God's eyes, not only are there no unclean foods, but there are no unclean people either. God's love is for everyone. Peter proceeds to break all the accepted rules of the day by preaching the Gospel to Gentiles, and baptizing them when they become believers, which got him in a heap of trouble with the church leaders back home in Jerusalem.

Now if you think this is just a story about the problems between Jews and Gentiles in the first century, please think again. Because I think we all have our private lists of those we like to think of as unacceptable, undeserving, or unworthy before God. Maybe it's Muslims, or Hispanics, or illegal immigrants. Maybe it's Wall Street bankers or others who get big bonuses at the end of the year. Maybe it's Democrats or Republicans, liberals or conservatives. God in Jesus Christ has given us a new vision, a new commandment. Look beyond the labels. See the child of God behind the stereotypes. God does not play favorites. Love one another as I have loved you.

Let's not have any illusions about how easy it is to love one another as Jesus loves us. In my role as a member of the Committee on Ministry for our Presbytery, I get to see some of the worst stuff that can go on in churches. Conflicts with the pastor. Conflicts with one another. People who can't talk to each other or who refuse to listen to each other until the point of explosion is reached and dreadful things are said and done that cannot be taken back. And of course you know that there are some outside the church who will gleefully seize these opportunities to point and snicker and sneer about "See how they love one another."

Jesus said: Love one another as I have loved you. Who is this you that Jesus refers to? It's not just his twelve best friends from 2000 years ago. It's you and me. If we are going to love others as he loves us, we have to know his love for us first hand. It's not enough to hear about it. Too often churches lead people to believe that it's what we know about Jesus that counts, rather than the depth and quality of our relationship with him. This leads us to think we can generate Jesus' kind of love all by ourselves, since we know all about it. We think by trying harder, we can love his way. We cannot, because the ability to love his way is rooted and centered in our relationship with him. That relationship, like any other relationship that is important to us, takes time. None of us have enough of that. So we settle for loving in ways that are not Jesus' ways. We settle for being nice, or not offending anyone. That can work for a while, maybe quite a while. But eventually things break down. When conflicts erupt, when hurts happen, and they will, a religion of niceness and non-offense leaves us with very few resources to cope.

These resources come only from our relationship with Jesus Christ, who sees us as we truly are, and yet still loves us endlessly, enough to die for us. He calls us closer into relationship with him, so we may learn to love his way. There is no other way. We cannot do it on our own.

Today Jesus welcomes us to his table of love, where he strengthens us for our life in him. As you come to his table this day, hear his words, spoken to your heart:

Love one another as I love you. This is how others will know that you are my disciples.

To God be the glory. Amen.