

“A New Commandment: Love One Another Out of the Depths”

John 13:34-35

Message for October 2, 2022

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My husband earned major parenting points when our kids were toddlers who always seemed to be quarreling. We'd been struggling to come up with the right language, the best consequences, the consistent expectations that would help our children figure out how to communicate and interact without all of us tearing our hair out! One day, in the middle of yet another tear-filled and finger-pointing afternoon, as the kids were interrupting one another with increasing volume so each of them could present their side of the story, my husband calmly said, "Were your actions and words ones of love and respect?" Silence. His question cut all of that noise down to pure silence. And blinking. Lots of blinking. It took him some time to talk through with them what actions and words show love and respect, but over the years they got better and better at looking at their interactions with one another through the lens of love and respect. For that matter, that lens was helpful in countless marital conversations as well!

That lived experience in my own household came to mind for me as I read today's Bible Wisdom teaching, in which we hear a short but powerful statement: "A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another." So often, in a world that is so complex and in our lives that, at times, feel so disjointed, we are reminded that at the center of it all, it's quite simple: "love one another." Now, simple doesn't mean easy, but the simplicity of it is much like the rule that my brilliant husband came up with decades ago – if you follow this one rule, this one commandment, you will in fact be following all of the other rules.

If we love one another as we are loved by the divine, there will be no room/no way to commit murder or adultery, or to covet another person's relationship or lie or cheat or steal. You will feel drawn to observing the sacred and deepening your relationship with God and with your family and with everyone you interact with. If love is at the center, everything else falls into place.

This new commandment is simple enough for a child to understand, and challenging enough that no mature Christian will claim to have obeyed it fully.

Of course, the “new” commandment is not entirely new. In the Book of Leviticus we hear, “You shall not take vengeance nor bear any grudge against the children of your people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself: I am Yahweh.”

That commandment required Israelites to love only other Israelites, but just a few verses later the scope is expanded: “The stranger who lives as a foreigner with you shall be to you as the native-born among you, and you shall love him as yourself; for you lived as foreigners in the land of Egypt. I am Yahweh your God.”

What, then, is new about Jesus’ commandment?

This new commandment is positive and open-ended. Rather than focusing on “Thou shalt not,” it says, “thou shalt.” Where many Old Testament laws were very specific, this law is very broad. We can never claim full compliance, because there is no end to the requirement. When have we loved enough? There is always need for more love. People could respond to the old law with a bookkeeper’s mindset. Not so with this new commandment!

The focus is on loving action rather than loving feelings. In chapter 15, Jesus will repeat the commandment, saying, “This is my commandment, that you love one another, even as I have loved you. Greater love has no one than this, that someone lay down his life for his friends” (15:12-13). In his own life, Jesus translates love into action that benefits the beloved. He calls us to do the same.

This makes it possible to obey. While it might be impossible to feel affection for some people, it is not impossible to help them. Our action-love is a gift of Christ, who loved us, showed us how love behaves, and makes of us a new people born again in his image and capable of loving with his love. We can truly obey this commandment when “it is no longer I that live, but Christ living in me. That life which I now live in the flesh, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me, and gave himself up for me ” (Galatians 2:20).

If you believe yourself to have a valid excuse not to love a particular person, consider the context in which Jesus tells the disciples to love one another. Jesus has just told them that one of them will betray him, and they do not know who that will be. The betrayer has departed (v. 30), but the disciples do not know that (vv. 28-29). Jesus commands them to love one another

anyway—in spite of the fact that they do not know who the betrayer will be—do not know who it is that they cannot trust.

In the final words of today’s text, Jesus reminds us that Christian witness always involves love: “By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another.”

Ignoring this new commandment is not an option. Last week we explored the apostle Paul’s words to the people of Corinth as he spoke to them of being multiple members of the one body in Christ. This teaching resonates clearly today as we reflect on the worldwide body of Christ. Following Paul’s directive about unity, in the next chapter, Paul reminds us that ignoring this new commandment is not an option: “If I speak in the tongues of mortals and of angels, but do not have love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing. If I give away all my possessions, and if I hand over my body so that I may boast, but do not have love, I gain nothing. (1 Corinthians 13:1-3).

Ultimately what is required of us is to rely on God’s grace rather than our compliance with the law. Most of us fail daily to act in loving ways – even toward loved ones – and even more so toward people who run us the wrong way! The Good News is that God loves us anyway! We must pray for grace to keep the commandment—and for grace when we fail.

As you contemplate what it means to love everyone as we have been loved, I invite you to reflect on these questions:

- What helps me accept and endure hurt without letting it degrade me and without passing it on?
- When have I relied on God for the patience to endure a difficult time?
- When I feel discouraged about the state of the world, what helps me keep going?
- In what ways am I endeavoring to face the evil in the world and to match it with redemptive love?