

Fifth Sunday of Easter
May 9, 2004
John 13:34-35

Sermon by Pastor Paul Janke

The New Command Is the Old Command: Love

1. Love that we learn from Jesus
2. Love that we show to one another
3. Love that identifies us as Christians

^{NIV} John 13:34 "A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. ³⁵ By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another."

One of the first things we have to ask as we hear these familiar words of Jesus is, "What makes 'Love one another' a *new* command? This wasn't the first time Jesus said, "Love one another." When that expert in the law came to Jesus and tested him with the question, "**Which is the greatest commandment in the Law?**" Jesus said, "**Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.'** Then the Lord went on to say, "**And the second is like it: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.'**" (Matt. 22: 37-39) Jesus is quoting here from the Law of Moses, written more than fourteen centuries before his birth. Clearly, the command to love one another had been heard well before the earthly ministry of Jesus. So why does Jesus call it a *new* command?

We get some help in answering this question in 1 John, the second chapter. Listen to what John writes here: "**This is how we know we are in him: Whoever claims to live in him must walk as Jesus did. Dear friends, I am not writing you a new command but an old one, which you have had since the beginning. This old command is the message you have heard. Yet I am writing you a new command; its truth is seen in him and you..." (1 John 2:5b-8) According to the apostle John, "Love one another" is an old command that got fresh meaning through the atoning work of Jesus. And this old command with new meaning is still our risen Savior's will for us. He still desires that we love one another. From what Jesus says here, we can see that this is 1] love that we learn from Jesus, 2] that this is love that show to one another, and 3] this is love that identifies us as Christians.**

1. Love that we learn from Jesus

Jesus spoke these words on the evening that he celebrated the Passover one last time with his disciples. At the beginning of the chapter it says, *"Jesus knew that the time had come for him to leave the world and go to the Father. Having loved his own who were in the world, he now showed them the full extent of his love."* With Jesus there were none of the excuses we sometimes offer for our failures to love one another. If Jesus had said, "I've got a lot on my mind right now," or "I'm under a lot of stress," it would have been true. But what we find in that upper room is not a stressed-out, self-absorbed Savior, but one who is willing to wrap a towel around his waist and wash the feet of his disciples. And that was just the beginning. The "full extent" of his love meant instituting a sacrament that was to be a vehicle for transmitting his love to his disciples of every succeeding generation. It meant praying for his disciples then and now in his agonized prayer in the Garden. It meant surrendering to his captors, even when he knew it meant certain death. And the "full extent" of his love included being pierced for our transgressions and crushed for our iniquities at Calvary.

And though the love of Jesus came was seen to its fullest extent in his Passion, his whole life and ministry had been characterized by love. In love for Joseph and Mary, he was obedient to them. Love caused him to linger at Jacob's well so he could strike up a conversation with the Samaritan woman. Love moved him to receive Nicodemus, that night-time visitor, and speak to him about being born again. Yes, it was love for Peter that caused Jesus to speak so harshly to his disciple, **"Get behind me, Satan!"** And it was most assuredly love that caused him to say to the dying thief, **"Today you will be with me in paradise."** (Luke 23:43) Jesus' whole life was love.

But we aren't simply spectators to the love of Jesus. With the apostle Paul we can say, **"The Son of God loved me and gave himself for me."** (Gal. 2:20) There was nothing haphazard about this love. It's not just right-place, right-time kind of love. God chose us for this before creation of the world. He sent the Holy Spirit to work in us through the gospel so that his love for us could be poured into our hearts. In love he cleansed us of our sin through Holy Baptism. Time and again he reassures us of his love for us as he invites us to his Table for a feast of love. Our Savior's love for us came first. It was all undeserved as far as we are concerned. But through the Gospels, it's a love we've learned to know very well—and a love we believe in and take comfort in.

Are you a mimic? Some people have that ability. Oh, maybe they're not as good as Dana Carvey doing George Bush or Rich Little doing Johnny Carson. But they have a knack for mimicking the words or gestures of a teacher or a politician or some other famous person. The fact is that God wants each of us Christians to be mimics. God wants us to imitate Jesus. St. Paul wrote to the Ephesians, **"Be imitators of God, therefore, as dearly loved children and live a life of love, just as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us."** (Eph. 5:1-2) The love that we've learned from Jesus is love that we are to show to one another.

2. Love that we show to one another

Given the fact that this exhortation to love comes in the middle of a conversation where Jesus is talking about taking leave of his disciples, we might expect that he would tell them to love him. He doesn't. Nor does he tell them at this time to love their enemies, though that might have been appropriate given what was soon to happen. He tells them to love one another. He tells them to love one another as he has loved them. And I think they knew exactly what he meant. No more of this trying to step over each other on the ladder to greatness. No more arguing or self-seeking. Love one another: a spirit of service, of self-sacrifice, an act of the will, strengthened by habit. Jesus isn't ordering his disciples to feel a certain way—loving—but he is exhorting them to act in a certain way. This is the love of actions and of truth. He wants them to act not only in their own interests but also in the interests of others.

"Love one another" is easy to say, but don't miss how high Jesus is setting the bar here. The whole second table of the law is included in these three words. If we could love one another perfectly, there'd be no need for commandments four through ten. If we could love one another consistently, there'd be no disrespect for authority. Then we'd never hurt each other or think impure thoughts or cheat or lie or covet the property or people of our neighbors. If nothing but unadulterated love coursed through our veins, then we'd never let loose with angry words or hurtful comments. Then we'd never play host to the sinful thoughts that prove that sin infects us to the core. Every sin can be traced back to the imperfections in our love for each other. And our sins against the law of love are also sins against the God of love. And John is pretty blunt about what this means. He says, **"Whoever does not love does not know God."** (1 John 4:8) Ouch! With just three words, Jesus has convicted me of sin and placed me under his condemnation.

This is where we have to run back to the love that Jesus showed for us. He bids us confess our sins and admit that we haven't loved him or our neighbor as we should. He calls us to acknowledge our lack of love for the wretched, damning thing that it is and then he invites us to find refuge in his love for us. **"He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to purify us from all unrighteousness."** Jesus speaks to the Father in our defense. **"He is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not only for ours but also for the sins of the whole world."** And it's due to the strength that this forgiveness provides that Jesus can say to us, "Love one another."

In the power of God's love, we can love each other. Today is a day for recognizing and giving thanks for the love of our mothers. A mother's love for her child can bear some powerful similarities to God's love for us. God's love is self-sacrificing, as was—in so many cases—the love our mother's lavished on us. They put their own desires, goals, and ambitions on hold—or set them aside altogether—so that they could care for us and provide what we needed from them and could not get anywhere else. God's love is resilient, as was—in so many cases—the love we received from our mothers. Through our toddler tantrums, our childish selfishness, and our teenage disrespect, she still loved us, just as God does. In love she disciplined us at times for our good. God does that, too. By the power of God's Spirit, Christian love is alive and active and we give thanks today if we received such love from our mothers.

But now let me ask you this: Why does Jesus tell us to love one another? We could probably give several answers. For one thing, God is glorified when we let our light shine by loving each other. It's also true that we are blessed as we live in love for each other. But the reason Jesus cites for loving one another is neither of these. He says, *"By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another."* Love, then, identifies us as Christians.

3. Love that identifies us as Christians

What is it that allows you to identify yourself as a Christian, as a disciple of Jesus Christ. It's faith, isn't it? If you hold to my teaching, Jesus said, then you are really my disciples. But faith lives in your heart, out of the view of other people. God can look at your heart and know that you belong to him, but other people will know that our confession of faith is sincere when it's accompanied by loving words and actions.

A few weeks ago I read about a couple who went to see the movie, "The Passion of the Christ." After the movie, the two of them got into such a fierce disagreement about the meaning of the movie that the police had to be summoned to settle their domestic disturbance. The incident left the police officers shaking their heads. It seemed clear that those folks hadn't made the connection between Jesus' love for them and their love for each other. And what if one of them had won the argument and proved the other wrong? In the absence of love, being right was useless. As someone has said, "Even the best orthodoxy cannot take the place of love."

Thankfully, though, there are many other instances where Christians love for each other has a powerful impact on those who observe it. A Christian leader by the name of Tertullian, who lived about 200 A.D. wrote, "***But it is mainly the deeds of a love so noble that lead many to put a brand upon us. 'See,' they say, 'how they love one another,' for they themselves are animated by mutual hatred; 'see how they are ready to die for one another,' for they themselves will rather put to death.***" (Apology, XXXIX) "See, how they love one another!" What a powerful thing that is when unbelievers are led to say such things about us Christians. That's what Jesus wants to happen. And that's what can and does happen as the love of Jesus continues to increase our capacity for love.

Love one another. Whether that's a new command or an old command, it's very much an important and relevant command. We who have learned what love is from Jesus can love one another. Even unbelievers benefit when we do. Amen.