

Epworth Chapel on the Green
May 19, 2019
Fifth Sunday of Easter
Rev. Dr. Brook Thelander

Acts 13:44-52
Psalm 145
Revelation 19:1-9
John 13:31-35

As we move deeper into the Easter season and closer to the events of Jesus' ascension and the day of Pentecost, the lectionary tries to assist us by preparing us for those events so that they don't happen to us unexpectedly.

Our Gospel lesson today takes us back to Holy Week -- to the upper room where Jesus shares his last meal with the disciples. Just prior to this meal he has taken a towel and washed his disciples' feet.

Next, he tells them he is going away, and he tries to prepare them for the tension and uncertainty which is to follow. In doing so, he speaks an innocent, yet troubling word. He says to them: "I give you a new commandment, that you love one another."

What is troubling about this word from Jesus is that the command to love was *not* new. The disciples had known and heard this command for a long time. It was very much part of their tradition. Leviticus 19:18 rings in their ears: "Love your neighbor as yourself." As far as the disciples were concerned, there has always been a love commandment. This word is a little troubling to them, then, because it is anything but new.

Not only was love a familiar theme to the disciples, it is also well-known to us as well. Love one another. We've heard it so much and so often, we're quite familiar with it. Yet it can be just as difficult for *us* to hear this word from Jesus as it was for his first disciples.

This is especially true if we take our cue about love from the culture. Our culture has turned love into sentimentality and romantic feelings. In 1970 the Dave Clark Five had a hit song titled, "Everybody Get Together." Do you remember it?

*Come on, people now
Smile on your brother
Everybody get together
Try to love one another right now.* (If Somebody Loves You: Dave Clark Five [Columbia, 1970])

For those of you a little less secular and a little more evangelical, you may have spent a lot of time singing the song, "They Will Know We Are Christians By Our Love." I don't mean to be harsh, but this song has so much syrup in it that you could serve it with pancakes.

So *our* problem is similar to that of the disciples. How do you put a new spin on an old theme? Where's the newness in something so familiar as love, something we've heard forever and ever?

To answer that, perhaps all we need to do is return to the text, and to the words of Jesus: "Love one another, as I have loved you."

How has Jesus loved these men? Well, he has called them, he has taught them, he has blessed them. He has invited them to be a part of everything he has done. He has cared for them like a shepherd cares for sheep, and he has revealed the Father to them. And on the very night in question here, he has picked up a towel and washed their feet.

The love to which Jesus calls his disciples here has *all of the romantic sentiment drained off of it*, until all that remains are tangible acts of servanthood. And Jesus says that *this* love -- these concrete, tangible acts of service -- are what demonstrate to the world that his disciples belong to him.

All of this is well and good, but the question still remains: How is Jesus' command for us to love one another a *new* command? The only thing that seems different is that Jesus is preparing to ascend to the Father. But this new factor in the equation may give us a clue as to how the command to love one another is new.

Perhaps what is "new" about this command is that when we love others like Jesus loves us, our loving actions continue to make him *present* in our lives and in the world even though he is physically *absent*. Jesus withdraws from our *sight*, in order that he may be known through our *love*.

American poet Edgar Guest, who lived at the turn of the century, once told a story of his neighbor, Jim Potter. Mr. Potter ran the drugstore in the small town

where Edgar Guest lived. Guest would pass by his neighbor each day and they would exchange small talk, but that's as far as it went.

Then one night Edgar Guest's first born son died suddenly. The subsequent days and weeks were grim and depressing for this grieving father. He felt lonely and defeated.

One day Guest had to go to the drugstore for medication. When he entered the store, Jim Potter motioned for him to come behind the counter. Guest walked around behind the counter to where Potter stood.

"Eddie," he said, "I'm at a loss for words to express the great sympathy I have for you at this time. All I can say is that I'm terribly sorry, and if you need me to do anything, you can count on me."

Years later Guest wrote of that encounter in one of his books. These are his words: "Just a person across the way -- a passing acquaintance. Jim Potter may have long since forgotten that moment when he extended his hand to me in sympathy, but I shall never forget it -- never in all my life. To me it stands out like the silhouette of a lonely tree against a crimson sunset."

As we prepare to come to the Lord's Table this morning, I want you to think about the wonderful and beautiful people who sit to your right and to your left. I want you to visualize those who sit behind you and in front of you.

These persons are not generic others. They are the specific men, women, and children God has placed in *your* life. And your decision to love *these* specific people in *this* specific place will demonstrate to the world -- more than anything else -- that you truly love Jesus and truly desire to follow him.

And now I want you to picture in your mind the difficult people in your life. Perhaps a co-worker or a boss who “gets under your skin” and tests your patience. Perhaps a neighbor who is rude and inconsiderate. Perhaps it is a brother or sister, or an aunt or uncle.

And now let’s go one step further. Picture in your mind now someone who is an enemy. Someone who engenders thoughts of anger and perhaps even hatred in your heart.

As we come to the Lord’s Table, we are coming to receive grace from the One who washed the feet of the one who betrayed him to his death. The One we claim to follow with our lives is here with us in bread and wine, and the grace he gives us empowers us to sacrificially give ourselves away for the good of the “other,” even when that “other” is an enemy. Nothing else is worthy of the word “love.”

So come with faith. Open your hearts to receive Christ’s love to you. And then go forth to love others in the same manner in which Christ has loved you.

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.