

Epworth Chapel on the Green
April 24, 2016
Fifth Sunday of Easter
Rev. Dr. Brook Thelander

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

Sometimes, the most familiar passages in the Bible are the most difficult to preach. Such is the case today as we encounter the words of Jesus in our Gospel lesson from John.

This text can be difficult to preach because when a passage from Scripture is familiar to us, we assume we already know what it means before we hear it. Jesus is sitting around the table with his disciples before his death, and he says: “I want you all to love one another.” Yeah, yeah, we get it.

But think about Jesus’ words for a moment. So simple. So easy to understand. *And yet so ridiculously hard to do.*

It would be like telling a novice golfer to “Keep your head down and watch the club strike the ball.” Easy to understand; ridiculously hard to do.

Like someone telling your hands not to sweat and your heart not to beat faster when you are unexpectedly called on to speak in public. Easy to understand. Not so easy to do.

Or if I asked all of you this morning to lick your elbow. Absurdly easy to understand; ridiculously hard to *do*.

Do you remember what Mark Twain said? He said, “It’s not the parts of the Bible that I don’t understand that bother me. It’s the parts of the Bible that I *do understand* that cause me difficulty.”

I would think that Twain had a passage like this in mind when he uttered those words, don’t you? “Love one another, as I have loved you.” Understanding them is one thing. *Doing* them is another thing altogether.

It’s interesting to me that these words are nearly the *last* words Jesus leaves with his disciples. He’s sitting at the table with them, where he has taken a towel and washed their feet. Judas is about to betray him, and he is about to be brutally murdered, or the way Jesus describes it, “to enter into his glory.”

Jesus could have said a lot of things in this situation. He could have said something like, “Keep a stiff upper lip, boys!” Or, “When I leave, I want you to go out and preach and teach the Gospel to the whole world.”

Jesus could have said something like, “Men, come bleed and die with me.” Something reminiscent of William Wallace in the movie *Braveheart*.

But instead, his disciples hear these simple words: “Love one another, as I have loved you.”

Jesus has taken a towel and washed the feet of these men, including Judas. He is now about to go out and die for persons who most assuredly do not *like* him, let alone *love* him. Love in this case is definitely not a feeling or an emotion. *Love*

is a verb. Love is an act of will that chooses and desires the good of another. Love is placing the good of another first, even when it means sacrifice. And when Jesus' followers do this, says Jesus, the world sits up and pays attention.

So, Jesus says: "Love one another, as I have loved you."

Then what did Jesus do? He went to the cross. And why did he go to the cross? Was it to satisfy God's *justice*? Perhaps.

Did he go to the cross in order to take the *punishment* for our sins upon himself? Some have said so.

Did he go to the cross to pay a *ransom* in order to buy us back from the captivity of our sin? Some would say yes.

Did Jesus go to the cross so that God would not be mad at us any longer? Some have believed as much.

But I believe the reason Jesus went to the cross is to show us how very much we are *loved*. When John says that God gave His only begotten Son to the world so that those who believe will have eternal life, what was the reason? What was the motivation?

Was it that justice might be served? That punishment might be meted out? That anger might be abated?

You know the answer to that question. And so do I.

One gospel song puts it like this:

*In letters of crimson, God wrote His love
On the hillside so long, long ago;
God wrote His love with the same hands that suffered and bled;
For you and for me Jesus died, and love's greatest story was told.*

*I love you, I love you,
That's what Calvary said;
I love you, I love you,
I love you, written in red.* (“Written in Red,” words and music by Gordon Jensen)

Brothers and sisters, the reason Jesus asked his disciples to love one another was because they were so already so deeply *loved*. Any time you find a command in Scripture, where God or Jesus is commanding something from human beings, you will also find underlying that command a prior gracious action of God that makes that obedience possible.

When God is ready to give the people the Ten Commandments on Mt. Sinai, he doesn't begin by saying: “Don't have any God's before me, don't steal, don't murder, don't covet.” He says, “I am God Almighty, who changed your life, who changed your world, who changed your reality.”

When the apostle Paul begins the twelfth chapter of Romans by saying, “I urge you to present your bodies to God as living sacrifices where you will no longer be conformed to the pattern of this world,” he can only say that because he has spent the first eleven chapters telling them that although the wages of sin is death, the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus. There is therefore now no

condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus, for the law of the Spirit of life has set them free from the law of sin and death.

Every command in Scripture is a veiled promise. Underlying every command is a promise of grace which liberates and empowers us to fulfill the command.

So when Jesus says, “Love one another as I have loved you,” it may at first seem ridiculously hard to do. But in reality his love for us is so deep and so powerful that it actually “frees us up” and empowers us to love others in the way we have been loved.

We no longer look at it as though we have to “grit out teeth” and love one another. We now look at it in terms of, “I am loved – and I am free!” Free to give myself away, free to see others through Jesus’ eyes, free to give, to bless, to affirm, to encourage. We are so immersed in love, so awash in the love of God, that we turn our hearts toward others.

As we come to the table this morning, the bread and wine you are about to receive are the visible expressions of how deeply you are loved. They are channels of that love that fell to its knees, took a towel, and washed the feet of broken people like you and me. The bread and wine remind you today that you are God’s beloved, that you are awash in an ocean of pure love.

And they are also channels of God's grace, working to empower you share that love, even as you have received it. So come with faith. Receive the grace that awaits you here. Rise up, and love one another as you have been loved. It may just be that the world will sit up and pay attention.

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