

“Jesus’s Deepest Desire”

The Gospel Lesson for today is read from John 13:31-35

Hear the words from the Jesus’ beloved disciple, John:

Read John 13:31-35

“The Word of God for the people of God.”

“Thanks be to God”

Let us pray:

Loving God, most holy Friend, give us light that we may see where error clouds our vision, or where lack of love and faith withers our hopes. Grant us light that we may see more clearly and follow more dearly. Through Christ Jesus our Redeemer. Amen!

Intro:

I want to start this morning with asking you all a question: ***If you knew you were about to die, what would you tell the people you love?***

I know I mention my father’s death in here a lot, but I can’t help but think about him and this question and what he would have said to me. What cherished hope or dream he would have shared? What last, urgent piece of advice he would have offered?

Although I will never know what he might have said... in our Gospel reading this morning, I know what Jesus says to this difficult question. Judas has left the Last Supper in order to carry out his betrayal, the crucifixion clock is ticking fast and hard, and Jesus knows that his disciples are about to face the greatest devastation of their lives. So he gets right to the point. No parables, no stories, no pithy sayings. ***Just one commandment. One simple, straightforward commandment, summarizing Jesus’s deepest desire for his followers: “Love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another.”***

And then, right on the heels of the commandment, a promise. Or maybe an incentive. Or maybe a warning. He says, “By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.”

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Let me point out what Jesus doesn’t say? When death comes knocking, and the Son of God has mere hours left to communicate the heart of his message to his disciples, he doesn’t say, “Believe the right things.” He doesn’t say, “buy indulgences or say a bunch of hail mary’s or the Apostles or Nicene Creeds everyday.” He doesn’t say, “Worship like this or attend a church like that.” He doesn’t even say, “Read your Bible,” or “Pray every day,” or “Preach the Gospel to every living creature.” He says, “Love one another.” That’s it. The last dream of a dead man walking. All of Christianity distilled down to its essence so that maybe we’ll pause long enough to hear it. Love one another.

What’s staggering about this commandment is how badly we’ve managed to botch it over the last two thousand years. New Testament scholar D.A Carson names the irony this way: “This new command is simple enough for a toddler to memorize and appreciate, and yet it is profound enough that the most mature believers are repeatedly embarrassed at how poorly they comprehend it and put it into practice.”

When I look at my own life, it’s not too hard to name why I constantly fail to obey Jesus’s dying wish. Love is vulnerable-making, and I’d rather not be vulnerable. Love requires trust, and I’m naturally suspicious. I over analyze and think too much. Love spills over margins and boundaries, and I feel safer and holier policing my borders. Love takes time, effort, discipline, and transformation, (as I’m learning in my 2nd semester of “husband in training 101,” and I am just so darned busy lately in that course.

And yet Jesus didn’t say, “This is my suggestion.” He said, “This is my commandment.” Meaning, it’s not a choice. It’s not a matter of personal preference; it’s a matter of obedience to the one we call Lord.

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But what does it mean that Jesus commands us to love? Does love obey the order of things? Does love obey the rules? My guess is, most of us would say no. Shaped as we are by Hollywood and their movies, or by Jim and Pam from The Office television show, or Nicholas Sparks novels, or Shakespeare, we usually think of love as spontaneous and free-flowing. We **fall** in love. And in many different ways. Love is blind, love happens at first sight, love breaks our hearts, and loves course never runs smooth. All are true!

Even if we put our culture’s hokey clichés aside, we know that real authentic love can’t be manipulated, imitated, or rushed without suffering distortion. Those of you who have kids understand full well that commanding them to love each other never works. The most we can do is insist that they behave as if they love each other: “Share your toys.” “Say sorry.” “Don’t do that.” “Don’t hit each other.” “Use kind words.” But these actions — often performed with gritted teeth and rolling eyes — aren’t the same as what Jesus is talking about.

Jesus doesn’t say, “**Act** as if you love.” He doesn’t give his disciples (or us) the easy “out” of doing nice things with clenched hearts. (Nor would I want him to; nothing feels as hollow as a “loving” act performed mechanically. Moreover, I doubt that the people who flocked to Jesus would have done so if they sensed that his love and compassion was forced.) He says, “Love as I have loved you.” As in, for real. As in, the whole bona fide package. Authentic feeling, deep engagement, generous action. Doesn’t it sound like he’s asking for the impossible?

Maybe he is. G.K Chesterton once wrote that "The Christian ideal has not been tried and found wanting. It has been found difficult and left untried." Imagine what would happen to us, to the Church, to the world, if we took this commandment of Jesus’s seriously? What could Christendom look like if we obeyed His orders and cultivated “impossible” love?

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I ask these questions fearfully, because I don’t know how to answer them, even for myself. I mean, I know fairly well how to do things. I know how to take meals to the elderly for Meals on Wheels. Or visit people in the hospital. Or put money in the offering plate. But do I know how to love as Jesus loved? To feel a depth of compassion that’s gut-punching? To experience a hunger for justice so fierce and so urgent that I rearrange my life in order to pursue it? To empathize (NOT SYMPATHIZE) until my heart breaks? {PAUSE} Do I want to?

Most of the time — and I’ll be honest — {PAUSE} I don’t. I want to be safe. I want to keep my circle small and manageable. And I want to choose the people I love based on my own preferences — not on Jesus’s all-inclusive commandment. Charitable actions are easy. But cultivating my heart? Preparing, growing and pruning it to love? Becoming vulnerable in authentic ways to the world’s pain? Those things are hard. Hard and costly.

And yet this was Jesus’s dying wish. Which means that we have a God who first and foremost wants every one of his children to feel loved. Not shamed. Not punished. Not chastised. Not judged. Not isolated. But loved.

But that’s not all. Jesus follows his commandment with an exhilarating and terrifying promise saying: “By this everyone will know.” Meaning, love is the ultimate test of Christian witness. Our love for each other is how the world will know who we are and whose we are. Our love for each other is how the world will see, taste, touch, hear, and find Jesus. It’s through our love that we will embody Jesus, make Jesus relatable, possible, plausible, to a dying world.

I can’t speak for you, but this makes me a little worried. What Jesus seems to be saying is that if we fail to love one another, the world won’t know what it needs to know about God, and in the terrible absence of that knowing, it will believe in things that break God’s heart. Mainly the falsehood that the whole Jesus thing is a sham. That there really is no transformative power

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in the resurrection. That God is a mean, angry, vindictive parent, determined only to shame and punish his children. That the universe is a cold, meaningless place, ungoverned by love. That the Church is only a flawed and hypocritical institution — not Christ’s living, breathing, healing body on earth.

Such is the power we wield in our decisions to love or not love. Such are the stakes involved in how we choose to respond to Jesus’s dying wish, hope, prayer, and commandment. Such is the responsibility we shoulder, whether we want to or not.

But here’s our saving grace: Jesus doesn’t leave us alone. We are not direction-less in the wilderness. He gives us a road map, a clear and beautiful way forward in saying: “As I have loved you.” Follow my example, he says. Do what I do. Love as I love. Live as you have seen me live.

Weep with those who weep. Laugh with those who laugh. Touch the untouchables. Feed the hungry. Welcome the child. Release the captive. Forgive the sinner. Confront the oppressor. Comfort the oppressed. Wash each other’s feet. Hold each other close. Tell each other the truth. Guide each other home.

In other words, Jesus’s commandment to us is not that we should wear ourselves out, trying to conjure love from within our already easily depleted resources. Rather, it’s that we’re invited to abide in the holy place where all love originates. We can make our home in Jesus’s love — the most abundant and infinite and unquenchable love in existence. Our love is not our own; it is God’s, and God our source is without limit, without end. There are no parched places God will not drench with His love if we ask.

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Just one commandment. One simple, straightforward commandment, summarizing Jesus’s deepest desire for his followers: “Love one another as I have loved you.” For our own sakes. And for the world’s.

Let us pray:

Christ, let us unearth that “one thing necessary”: the treasure of accepting and giving your love.

Not fair-weather love, not hearts-and-flowers love, but your own kindness, without limits.

Make us yours, giving our wealth and our honors, our bodies and our blood, our hearts and souls, hands and feet, our precious time. Make accepting and giving your love the one thing necessary.

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Prayers of the People

God of boundless energy and unqualified love, help us and all people to enter into the joy of your purposes, not limiting our expectations to past failures but opening up to the optimism of eternal life.

We pray for your blessing on those who are physically or mentally handicapped, yet who live a full and creative life.

We pray for the salvation of those who appear sound in body and mind yet are handicapped by a selfish, cramped, and boring outlook.

We pray your blessing on those who extend the boundaries of love, forgiving and liberating those who sin against them.

We pray for the salvation of those who lose the zest for life under the sour influence of anger, jealousy, resentment and bitterness.

We pray your blessing on those who know Christ as a profound happiness to be shared by deed and word through all the common scenes of life.

We pray for the salvation of those who have fallen into pious exclusiveness, becoming self righteous and judgmental.

We pray your blessing on those who in grave illness still believe in providence, and through deep sorrow continue to believe in life.

We pray for the salvation of those who, when ill or injured are in fear, and when in sorrow, are in despair.

We pray your blessing on those who on those politicians who, when in government, sincerely pray to be led by your Spirit of truth.

We pray for the salvation of those who, wanting to rule others, sell their souls for power and prestige and grow shameless in hiding the truth.

We pray your blessing on devoted Christians around us in this congregation for whom abundant life has long been a reality .

We pray for the salvation of those who for reasons they cannot understand, are haunted by doubts and anxieties that inhibit the life of faith.

To you, precious Source of eternal life, to your gracious wisdom we bring these meagre but sincere prayers.

Through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen !

SENT FORTH:

This is what I ask you to do: Love one another. Just as I have loved you, so you must love each other.

We love because Christ first loved us.

May God bless you and keep you, may God’s face shine upon you and be gracious unto you, may you know the eye of God upon you with the gift of His peace.

Amen!