

EASTER FIVE

April 24, 2016 - John 13:31-35

"Loving One Another"

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This morning, and for the next three Sundays, our Gospel lessons take us on a time warp as we look back on the words Jesus spoke to his disciples at the Last Supper. Sometimes it's only when we look back on something that we can finally make sense of it. And that's true with Jesus' words as recorded in John, chapters 13-17.

It is only after his death and resurrection that the disciples can truly understand what he told them on that final night together. And it's only through the lens of Good Friday and Easter that you and I can come to understand His words: *"I give you a new commandment - that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. "*

Now, in fact, this is **not exactly a new commandment**. Way back when Leviticus was written, the people of God were told: *"you shall love your neighbor as yourself."*

What is new about this commandment is the example Jesus provides, giving definite shape to his commandment: *"just as I have loved you."*

A little while before this, Jesus had washed his disciples' feet, and told them, *"just as I have served you, so you too ought to serve one another."*

On Maundy Thursday we learned, along with the disciples, that **we're called to a life of humble service to others**.

So when Jesus made this next statement about loving one another, the disciples probably thought it was just more of the same.

But now, after Jesus' crucifixion, we have a deeper understanding of what it means when he says, *"just as I have loved you."*

He's **not just talking about washing a few smelly feet**. How did Jesus show his love for his disciples? What did that love cause him to do for them... and for us?

It drove him to give up his life for us!

So when Jesus says to the disciples, and to us, *"Just as I have loved you..."* it makes us stop and think. **Does Jesus expect us to be willing to die for other Christians?** He certainly can't mean that, can he? **He knows us better than that.**

He knows our weaknesses: our **self-centeredness**, our **greed**, our **jealousy and pride** and our **fear of pain and suffering**.

Jesus knows all that, but still he says: *"Love one another, just as I have loved you."*

It's easy to hear this word only as a new demand. And if we do that, then it becomes a heavy burden, a goal I can never hope to achieve. It becomes just **one more way for me to think of myself as a failure as a Christian**.

But that's not Jesus' intention here. Because if we look at this passage within the context of the entire discourse of chapters 13-17 of John's Gospel we see that **it comes with a big promise**.

What is Jesus saying throughout this final speech to his followers?

Time and again, as we will see in the coming weeks, **Jesus is promising that, just as he and the Father are one, so his followers will also be united with him and God the Father**.

Jesus is assuring the disciples that, even though he will only be with them in visible form a little while longer, **he will not leave them alone**.

Even when the risen and visible Christ has ascended to the Father, his beloved disciples, his *"little children"* as he affectionately calls them, will **continue to be in him and in the Father**. **That's us, my friends!** Jesus promises that we will be in him and in the Father.

On Pentecost Sunday, we will talk more about Jesus' promise that he will always be with us in the person of the Holy Spirit.

You see, the **Spirit is THE PRESENCE OF CHRIST WITHIN THE CHURCH** – the community of believers.

And, I would add, it is **the living presence of the very love of Christ** within all Christians.

It is **this love of Christ** that makes it **even remotely possible** for us to **ever hope to love one another as Jesus loved us**.

THAT LOVE LIVES IN OUR HEARTS. It has **been there since the day we were baptized**.

Sometimes we're aware of it, more often we are not. **But, whether we aware of it or not, that love is there**.

So, when we hear Jesus telling us to *"love one another, just as he has loved us,"* we can **take comfort** in knowing that **we are not left to our own resources to make it happen**.

Loving as Jesus loves is not about **pulling ourselves up by our religious bootstraps**, so to speak. It's **not just another hopeless spiritual do-it-yourself project, doomed to failure**.

Instead, **because we have the presence of Jesus within us**, in the form of the Holy Spirit, we know that **the love of Christ is always at work** within us to **make our love more Christ-like**.

- This is the love that, in the words of the Christmas Carol, moved Jesus to *"leave his home and his kingly throne when he came to earth for me."*
- This is the love that compelled Jesus to take up the cross and die at Calvary for our sins.
- It is truly a *Love divine, all loves excelling* in the words of another hymn.

It's **a love that can quite literally TAKE OUR BREATH AWAY**.

Garrison Keillor's *Prairie Home Companion* often includes commercials for the fictitious product: Powdermilk Biscuits.

These biscuits, the ads say, *"give shy persons the strength to get up and do what needs to be done."*

In the same way, the love of Christ within us **can truly empower ordinary folks** to do **extraordinary things for others**, Christ's love is just that powerful!

So when Jesus tells us, *"Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another,"* he isn't **sending us on a mission impossible**.

Jesus knows that **he will always be a part of us, and we will always be a part of him**.

And that means that we will always have his love within us.

And that love – that *love divine, all loves excelling*, will **enable and empower us to love others in a Christ-like way**.

But wouldn't it be great **if we could just have some sign, some concrete, visible evidence** that Jesus is truly with us? It's just too easy to doubt it.

Wouldn't it **strengthen our confidence as we seek to love one another**, if we could be certain that Jesus is part of us, working to **transform our puny love into a love like his?**

The powers of hate and mistrust and suffering in our world are so strong. If only we could know for sure that Jesus' love truly lives inside of us.

My friends, **EVERY TIME WE RECEIVE HOLY COMMUNION, WE ARE GIVEN JUST SUCH A SIGN**.

As we come forward for communion, **Jesus himself is waiting to welcome us as the host**.

And at his table he gives himself to us in the bread and the wine. This is **a sign we can see, and feel, and taste and swallow.**

It may not look like much, but we believe that **Jesus truly comes to us in this meal.**

And that means he gives us His love, which will dwell within us, empowering our own love.

I'm sure many of you go through the motions of Holy Communion as if you're on auto-pilot – as if it's **really no big deal.**

But IT IS, in fact, A BIG DEAL... A VERY BIG DEAL.

In the bread and in the wine, the **promises of forgiveness and eternal life** are renewed once again.

Here we're reminded that **Jesus is a part of us**, just as intimately as the molecules of bread and wine become part of our cells after we ingest them.

And if we can remember that, then every time we receive communion we will be strengthened in our desire to **let the love of Christ be revealed in our lives.**

Of course, we can **never love one another exactly as Jesus loved us.** As sinners, **we will always fall short.**

But, **living in the embrace of that divine love**, we will **continue to ask forgiveness** and **begin again to love one another** with **the love that has claimed and redeemed us.**

So next Sunday, when you come forward for Communion, remember that Jesus is giving himself to you.

He wants to be a part of you, so that He can empower your actions of loving service to others.

And now, I'd like to close with a prayer taken from the book we give our 9th graders as a confirmation gift.

Let us pray:

"Lord Jesus, it is you, isn't it, coming to me in the meal? It is you ... filling me with your presence You are really there in the meal. You are really here with me.

Lord Jesus, you work through this sacrament even when I don't understand it perfectly.... You will not let my mood determine when you are present. You are present even when I don't feel it. You are working, even when I don't deserve it.

Lord, make my heart a believing heart, that I might see you coming to me in this meal, as clearly as I see the bread and wine.

May your love continue to grow within me, Lord, so that I might love others with that same, marvelous love. Amen."