

sermon-5/2/10 Newport Presbyterian Church
“Loving Like Jesus”
John 13:31-35

In order to appreciate this little passage in John we need to keep in mind what came directly before it and what came right after it. John wants to frame this new commandment Jesus is giving his disciples with the painful reality of the disciples’ fallibility.

Right before Jesus’ words to his disciples we read that Judas left to betray Jesus. Here was one of his inner circle, one of his trusted disciples, one he hoped would carry on after he was gone, and he is a traitor. John says simply after Judas left, “And it was night.” That little phrase says it all. This was a dark time.

It only gets worse. Right after Jesus’ words Peter promises to stick by Jesus even to the point of death. “I will lay down my life for you,” he says. Sadly Jesus tells him that is not how it is going to happen. Peter will deny Jesus three times before the night is over.

That is the context of Jesus’ words. On one side betrayal, and on the other side denial. Seeing that makes Jesus’ response even more touching. He did not let this dark time make him cynical. He did not give up on his fallible little band of ragamuffin disciples. He even refers to them with a very touching little term, “little children.” The depth of Jesus’ character and the extent of his love for these disciples is revealed in that tender address.

Jesus then gives them a new commandment. “Love one another.” This raises a whole host of questions. How can one command someone to love? How is this a new commandment? Didn’t we hear Jesus asking his disciples to love their neighbors as themselves before this? Even the Old Testament commands us to love our neighbors. What is going on here?

Very simply, love is not a feeling. Love is a decision to act in a certain way. It is a choice we make no matter how we feel. We cannot be commanded to feel loving toward another. We can be commanded to act a certain way regardless of how we feel. Thus, Jesus commands his disciples to love one another.

But how is this a new commandment? Jesus makes it new by what he expects from his disciples. They are to love as he loved them. It is coming to terms with that reality that makes this commandment tough. Look at the example Jesus sets as to how to love.

Fred Craddock says Jesus’ love was about four things. Jesus loved by telling the truth no matter how much trouble this caused. He loved by being faithful to the call of God in his life to share God’s word. He loved by acting for others even when they were unresponsive. And, he loved to the point of giving his life on the cross.

This loving is not for sissies. It requires a depth of commitment few of us have reached. To love this way is a choice we need to make every day in all our close relationships. In fact, note that Jesus commands the disciples to love one another. This is all about loving those with whom we are in a relationship. He does not tell them to love the world. He does not say they are to love their enemies. We can find that elsewhere in the New Testament. But right here in his closing remarks to his disciples, he urges them to love one another.

Jesus is on to something here. It is easy to love those we don't know all that well. It is easy to love the world. But, sometimes it is much harder to love those we know intimately and who know us intimately as well. Maybe if we can learn to love those on the inside we can be better equipped to love those on the outside.

Think about your families, close friends or the church. Those closest to us know when someone leaves the toilet seat up in the middle of the night. Insiders know when someone fails to clean up their mess after an activity. They know who fails to lock the doors at the end of the day. Insiders know we can fail to notice or thank them after they have worked all day to clean the house. Not only that, insiders know our buttons. They know just the right word or phrase that will set each us off.

Those are just the little irritations that can make us cranky and not very loving. Most of us know family and church relationships can get far messier, causing hurts and scars that plague our attempts to be loving.

When Jesus tells the disciples to love one another, John is having Jesus speak to his church some seventy years after Jesus' death. We know John's church was having trouble being civil to one another. They argued over theology, over who was supposed to take care of what, over who should be inside and who should be outside.

Don't we all know that. As we read John's gospel, Jesus is still speaking to the Church today. The Church is still arguing with each other. Sometimes it is much harder for Presbyterians to love some in other Presbyterian churches than it is for them to love Methodists, or Congregationalists, or even Baptists! Many of us even find it easier to love Buddhists, Muslims or Hindus than it is to love some in our own denomination.

Jesus tells his disciples to start with loving those on the inside, those you know best, and see if that doesn't help you grow in your loving so you might love those on the outside some, of whom, are not easy to love either.

We can hear these words without falling into utter despair at our inability to love in that way because we are not left on our own. It is God's Spirit Jesus promises that enables us to swallow our pride, our need to be right, our petty grievances and love even when we don't feel so loving.

Scholars point out that how we love reveals our true essence. That was certainly true for Jesus who revealed God's true essence in his costly love for us. What kind of essence are we revealing about ourselves in our loving?

Karen Armstrong says "Religion is not about having to believe or accept certain difficult propositions; instead religion is about doing things that change you." Loving as Jesus loved not only reveals our essence, it changes us as well. We are different people when we take our loving seriously. And when we love as Jesus loved us, others will be drawn to our presence, drawn to our Church.

Isak Dinesen, in her book, *Out of Africa*, tells the story of a boy named Kitau. "He appeared at the author's door one day to ask for a job as a domestic servant. She hired him but was surprised when after three months he asked her for a letter of recommendation to Sheik Ali bin Salim, a Muslim who lived in a nearby town. Dinesen offered to raise Kitau's pay in order to keep him, but money was not his interest. Kitau had decided to become either a Christian or a Muslim, and his purpose in working for Dinesen had been to see, up close, the way a Christian lived. Now that he had worked for Dinesen and seen the ways of Christians, he would go and observe Sheik Ali to see how Muslims behave; then he would decide. The author remembers how she wished Kitau had told her that before he came to live with her."

This Sunday, as we take communion, let us remember the one who showed us how to love, even when it was costly. Let us take the time to nurture our openness to God's Spirit. Let us commit to loving others as Jesus loved his disciples. Let us begin with those closest to us. Amen