

“A ‘new’ commandment”

John 13:31-35

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In this season of Easter we have been revisiting the stories of Jesus as recorded in the Gospel of John. We gathered a month ago and heard once again the story of Jesus’ resurrection. Since then we have explored the events following the resurrection as well as rewinding the tape to visit again the events that led up to the first Easter morning. This morning in John chapter thirteen we rewind yet again to find Jesus and his disciples. Here in a cozy appearing scene, Jesus reminds his disciples that he will be with them only awhile longer. After this acknowledgement he gives them a new commandment: “Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another.”

Now, I must confess that a couple months it was determined that we were going to use the lectionary texts for this Easter season. At that time I looked ahead to see which texts would fall on the Sundays I was scheduled to preach. I remember reading this commandment and having an initial thought of: “This is great! A sermon on love sounds appealing and engaging and relatively straight forward. You know, none of that heavy theology with big words that no one can pronounce let alone articulate. Love: sounds delightful.”

Well, are you familiar with the phrase don’t talk too soon? While on one hand I still deeply resonant with my initial reaction. However, on the other hand I found this sermon prep and writing to be much more difficult than initially anticipated. Why? Well, what is love? How do you describe it? Isn’t it really gray and open to be negotiated as to what it really means... what it really is or is not? How can we understand love when it is so distorted and abused by our media and culture? I fought the temptation to just say well let’s flip back in our Bible to

Deuteronomy and talk about the commandment do not steal, or observe the Sabbath, or do not covet your neighbors spouse or property. But then wait, if we are willing to dig below the surface those commandments are also a little sketchy on details and have the potential to provide just as many questions as to how to know if we are faithfully living them out.

As Jesus is preparing for his upcoming crucifixion he gives his followers this new commandment: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another.” I think that if we hold ourselves to only looking at this one verse we will find ourselves spinning our wheels as we strive to discern what does this mean. It is essential to hold that this new commandment comes within a broader narrative of the disciples gathered together. As well as holding onto how this new commandment fits within the emerging narrative of Jesus and his disciples. And in addition how this commandment fits within the entire biblical narrative of the people of God as recorded from the beginning in the garden of Eden. It will not serve us well to isolate this verse (and for that matter, any single verse in the Bible) without allowing the context to inform how we understand and apply this verse to our lives today in 2016.

So let us start with this one verse and move outwards from there. Jesus says that he is giving a *new* commandment: “Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another.” Now if this was your first and only exposure to the Bible, then perhaps you would assume that Jesus’ words are true in that this is a *new* commandment. However, if you are seasoned studier of the bible you might scratch your head a little and say, “I don’t think that this is necessarily new as I’m pretty sure I have heard something like this before.” And if that was you I would tell you that you are right. This commandment smells and sounds like previous commandments that Jesus’ disciples would have been familiar with. Of course Jesus and his followers would have studied

what is our Old Testament. In there they would have been very familiar with the Mosaic Covenant – the covenant that God made with Moses and God’s people. If you turn back to Deuteronomy chapter five (Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy) we find what are commonly referred to as the 10 Commandments. Continuing to chapter 6 we read:

These are the commands (referring back to the 10 Commandments), decrees and laws the Lord your God directed me to teach you to observe in the land that you are crossing the Jordan to possess, so that you, your children and their children after them may fear the Lord your God as long as you live by keeping all his degrees and commands that I give you, and so that you may enjoy long life.

Then continuing in verse 4 we read the Shema:

Hear, O Israel: the Lord your God, the Lord is one. Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength.

So this is not the first time Jesus’ followers would have thought about love. Clear back towards the beginning with Moses they were instructed to Love the Lord. Furthermore they were instructed to bind these words on their forehead, their doorposts, to recite them when they went to bed and when they began their day. In addition, if you were to turn to Leviticus chapter nineteen we find how these laws and commandments are fleshed out. There in verse eighteen we read love your neighbor as yourself. Several verses later in verse thirty-four we read love the foreigners residing among you as yourself, for you were foreigners in Egypt. So it was not the first time that they would have also heard the connection between love and God as well as love your neighbor.

So what makes this commandment unique in John chapter thirteen, or what makes it new? This week I appreciated learning an insight offered from one of our Anabaptist biblical scholars, Willard Swartley. As Swartley reflects on this verse he offers that “The usual translation is too weak...”¹ with the usual translation being: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. Swartley reminds us that “Jesus is not just a model of the past

to be limited. (Instead) The command(ment) also makes Jesus' love contemporary, empowering believers to love, then and now. (So Swartley offers) A better translation (one that) stresses this: love one another with the love with which I have loved you. This expresses the continuing relationship between Jesus and the believers”ⁱⁱ

Love one another with the love with which I have loved you. I don't know if you are like me, but when as I allow those words to settle into my soul I find myself releasing a breath I didn't realize I was holding. I release the breath as I think, hallelujah, it isn't just about me. Hallelujah I only need to be a conduit for Jesus' love. I don't have to fabricate it, come up with it, manufacture it, I only need to pass it on. And I am breathing deeply, feeling grateful, feeling relieved, feeling really good. And then the words sink in. *Love one another with the love with which I have loved you.* Hmm... *with the love with which I have loved you.* Oh no. For you see Jesus has loved me with a love that is unconditional, self-sacrificing, empowering, full of hope, a love that offers redemption and second and third and eightieth do overs. This love with which I have been loved is a love that loves amidst my imperfections, in spite of my short comings, in fact this is the love that says you are mine and I love you. No strings attached. I'm starting to wish that the new commandment instead had been “Love is a good thing. You should try it sometime. Look for ways to incorporate it as a side gig in your life.” But Jesus says by this, how we love each other, everyone will know that we are followers of Jesus.

Perhaps we will get a clue if we go back to the beginning of chapter thirteen. “It was just before the Passover Festival. Jesus knew that the hour had come for him to leave this world and go to the Father. Having *loved* his own who were in the world, he *loved* them to the end.” “To the end” can mean simultaneously “to the end of time” and “to the full extent of love.”ⁱⁱⁱ So this love, the love with which we have been loved that we are to love each other with, is a love that is

persistent and faithful to the end. In verse four we are told that Jesus got up from the meal, took off his outer clothing and wrapped a towel around his waist. Striking to note is that “The verb used to describe Jesus’ removal of his outer robe in (verse 4) (*tithemi*) is the same verb used in John (chapter) 10 to describe Jesus’ laying down his life (10:15, 17-18)^{iv} for his sheep. His act of taking off his outer robe is so much more significant than just casually and nonchalantly taking off his coat as he walks in the house. It makes us ask the question: what are the outer garments that we have put on to provide space and distance from those we are called to love? Whether those garments are put on out of self-protection, self-preservation, denial, or fear. What do we need to take off, remove, lay down, to enable us to get close enough to those we are called to love? Jesus’ action of taking off his outer clothing and picking up the towel and basin and washing the feet of those around the table is a way he enacts how he loves his disciples, how he loves us.

After he is finished washing the feet of those gathered he gives them this new commandment: love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. *Love one another with the love with which I have loved you.* If we continue reading chapters fourteen through sixteen we see that Jesus adds explanation to this commandment throughout what is known as his farewell discourse. It was as if Jesus knew that his disciples then and now would have a hard time grasping what he meant and how this can actually be done. So thankfully he provides more instructions and insights. Here in these next chapters Jesus frames the conversation with the image of the vine and the branches. Jesus is the vine, we are the branches, and his Father is the gardener. We are to remain in him as he remains in us. Again, is this understanding that we do not love on our own accord. We love because we have been loved, and that love has transformed us and we love with the same love. However, it is imperative that we stay connected to the love source.

I know that that line sounds rather cheesy and I tried to think of something that sounded much more theologically educated and informed to reflect my seven years of higher education in bible and theology. However, it all boils down to the simple truth that the *only* way we are able to live faithfully into this new commandment to love each other is if we stay connected, if we dwell in and with, the source of love, Jesus. If we try to love on our own strength, on our own accord, on our own will - we will fail. We might love some others well, but inevitably we will hit our wall, or build our wall, and say we have loved enough. It is only by staying connected to Jesus that his love is able to flow through us to the world around us. But, even saying that, it still begs for us to allow ourselves to be pruned. To allow the Holy Spirit, which is talked about in these chapters, to hold up a mirror and lead us in reflecting on where we have withheld the love to ourselves, where we have engaged in being judgmental, or where we have deemed that someone else is simply not worthy of our love. Now don't feel too smug looking at those around you and know with confidence that I am preaching to them and not to you. Oh no. I am preaching to each and every one of us gathered here today.

This week I found myself dwelling with the question of why did Jesus framed this all as a *commandment*? And I realized that if you think about the other commandments in the Bible, for example the 10 Commandments, they are listed as commandments because I believe that our natural tendency is to gravitate to the opposite of them. Or stated differently, they are things that God knew we would have to work at. They are things that don't just come easy, or naturally. Do not covet, do not commit adultery, do not lie, observe the Sabbath, do not worship any gods by Yahweh... love one another. They are things that we must choose to do, to follow, to embrace. They are each things that take time and dedication. They are each things that are only possible by staying connected to Jesus.

So, what does this love look like? Well to answer that we look at what we know about Jesus' love from the Bible. I would say that to love with the love we have been loved with, then we love who Jesus loved. Who did Jesus invite to his table? I think we are to invite them to ours. Who did Jesus reach out to, befriend, equip, touch? We are to do the same. What were the attributes of Jesus' love? What disclaimers, if any did he tack to his love? Our love should illuminate his attributes and only include disclaimers that Jesus incorporated. Jesus' love took him to the cross. Where does our love take us? Does our love take us to comfort, safety, judgement... does it take us to the cross? If we are thinking too hard I think we are missing the point. If we are trying to justify why we do not or cannot or will not love someone or a group of people or a nation of people, we are missing the point.

I don't know about you, but let me confess that I have done a really good job of putting limitations on Jesus' love. Sometimes for myself, and even more often for others. I was challenged this week as I listened to a podcast and heard Brené Brown declare that "worthiness has no prerequisite."^v Of course we are thankful to hear that, at least for ourselves. The challenge is to live into Jesus' new commandment and not live like there are prerequisites for Jesus' love, and therefore consequently for ours. By our love everyone will know that we are his disciples.

To love with the love of Jesus means that we stay connected to the vine and seek to become more and more like him. As we grow into the likeness of Jesus we will also grow in our ability and desire and willingness to love like Jesus loved and loved whom he loved. This week it is my heart's prayer, mine, Cynthia Elaine Wiltheiss Voth, that I might be faithful to new commandment: *Love one another with the love with which Jesus has loved me.* And as one of your pastor's I also pray that you will each grow in your understanding and faithfulness to this

new commandment: Love another with the love with which you have been loved. By God's grace, through Jesus' love, and by the Holy Spirit, may it be so. Amen.

ⁱ Willard Swartley, *Believers Church Bible Commentary: John* (Herald Press: Harrisonburg, Virginia), 327.

ⁱⁱ Swartley, *John*, 327.

ⁱⁱⁱ Gail R. O'Day, "Friendship as the Theological Center of the Gospel of John" in *Preaching John's Gospel: The World it Imagines*, David Fleer & Dave Bland, editors (Chalice Press: St. Louis, Missouri), 37-38.

^{iv} O'Day, "Friendship as the Theological Center of the Gospel of John," 37-38.

^v <https://www.facebook.com/theworkofthepeople/videos/10154068351455682/?pnref=story>