

“By this everyone will know...”  
Based on John 13: 31-35  
by Rev. Meghan Davis  
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A couple days ago, I got a call from Rowan, my 3 ½ year-old nephew. A few minutes into the conversation, out of nowhere he asked, “how much do you love me?” I was a little surprised because I’d never had a conversation with him about love. My first thought was, “I love you this much.” But since it was a phone conversation and he wouldn’t be able to see how much “this much” is, I nixed that. Then I said, “I love you all the way to the moon and back.” Then I asked, “how much do you love me?” He paused to think about it. Then said, “I love you a LOT!” (Actually, it was more like, “I yove you a YOT!”)

“I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another.”

It is the night of his arrest. Jesus has just foretold his betrayal by Judas and will go on to foretell Peter’s denial. The timing of the commandment and its placement among Jesus’ last words highlight the importance of the command. Jesus, knowing that in his arrest and death his disciples will face difficulties beyond their current ability to understand, gives them this key: love one another as I have loved you. The command to love one another is at the center of Jesus’ teaching and the center of the Christian life. As New Testament scholar Lewis Donelson notes, “The love command is both the organizing force and the sign of the Jesus community.”<sup>1</sup>

Jesus knows that the days ahead will be difficult for his friends. Likewise, life will be difficult for the early church in the Roman Empire. Jesus knows that it will be imperative that they be patient and loving with one another for survival. In referring to his friends as “little children,” Jesus’ tone is one of compassion. As theologian Joseph Bessler writes, “Jesus’ ‘command’ has the tone of an earnest plea—to care for one another, forgiving one another in the wake of Jesus’ death, even as he will forgive his tormentors from the cross.”<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Lewis R. Donelson, *Feasting on the Word*, Year C, Vol. 2 (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009), 473.

<sup>2</sup> Joseph A. Bessler, *Feasting on the Word*, Year C, Vol. 2 (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009), 470.

Jesus' "new commandment" wasn't actually so new. Leviticus 19:18 had already commanded Israel to "love your neighbor as yourself" so what's new about this command? In the Fourth Century, Augustine thought the difference was the *kind* of love to which Jesus was calling us—a kind of spiritual rather than carnal love. Augustine's contemporary, Cyril of Alexandria, asserted that what was new about the love command was the *degree* of the love—while the Levitical law called us to love our neighbors as we love ourselves, Jesus calls us to love one another as he has loved, a far higher degree of love than loving as we love ourselves. More recently, scholar Thomas Troeger asserts that, "the newness of the commandment...is in the source that feeds this love: the humility of the Almighty as revealed through Christ's death, the transformation of the meaning of glory from worldly renown to Godly compassion. We are not simply to use words to tell people about the meaning of the cross and resurrection; we are to love one another as a way of embodying the truth that Christ reveals through his death and resurrection."<sup>3</sup> Troeger favors the translation, "I have loved you in order that you also love one another" over "you also should love one another" because the "'should' sounds like a moral commandment divorced from the gracious action of Christ that makes possible our love."<sup>4</sup>

"I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another."

Jesus has just washed the feet of his disciples. He is calling them—and us—to love as he has loved, serving one another with love and compassion. Though in this specific context Jesus appears to be talking about loving each other within the Christian community, based on other teachings of Jesus about loving our enemies and our neighbor, we take a more universal interpretation of the love command. We love those within our church, and we also love those beyond our church walls in other churches, in other denominations, and not only Christians but those of other faiths and those of no faith. "By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another."

As most of you know, I just got back from a trip to Turkey. And though Turkey is a Muslim country, I was struck by some similarities that came out in conversations with our hosts who are part of an informal movement within Islam which seeks to bring world peace by addressing poverty, ignorance with education and disunity with dialogue. People gather together for "tea parties" where they have intimate fellowship, socialize, and discuss the Koran, their faith, and books. Service, too, is an extremely important component of these groups. They take on big projects, such as building schools as a way toward addressing the problems of the world and, more importantly, to please God. They feel that by serving others, they serve God.

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<sup>3</sup> Thomas H. Troeger, *Feasting on the Word*, Year C, Vol. 2 (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009), 473.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*

(Sound familiar?) We also had an opportunity to visit a non-profit organization which was started in response to the earthquake in Turkey in 1999. The name of the foundation is translated, “Anybody out there?” which was called out in the search for survivors. The organization continues to serve in natural disasters throughout the world as well as address issues of poverty.

In the book *Three Cups of Tea*, Greg Mortensen recalls being called by a mullah, a religious leader, to a refugee camp where there was no food or water or supplies of any kind. Reflecting back on that experience, Mortensen said, “I wish Westerners who misunderstand Muslims could have seen Syed Abbas in action that day. They would see that most people who practice the true teachings of Islam, even conservative mullahs like Syed Abbas, believe in peace and justice, not in terror. Just as the Torah and Bible teach concern for those in distress, the Koran instructs all Muslims to make caring for widows, orphans, and refugees a priority.”<sup>5</sup>

I take great comfort in knowing that we Christians don’t have the monopoly on service. We definitely don’t have the monopoly on love. Many faiths place more emphasis on what you do: how you pray and how you live than in particular beliefs. Christianity places a lot of emphasis on belief. Particular doctrines believed or not believed, particular interpretations of the Bible believed or not believed. Disagreements regarding beliefs have caused split after split in the church throughout the millennia and continue to threaten to do so. But Jesus’ new commandment is not about what we believe. It’s about how we live. And it sets the bar pretty high: being “Christian” means to love one another, to care for one another. New Testament scholar DA Carson notes, “[This] new command is simple enough for a toddler to memorize and appreciate, and it is profound enough that the most mature believers are repeatedly embarrassed at how poorly they comprehend it and put it into practice.”<sup>6</sup>

In her autobiographical book *Out of Africa*, author Isak Dinesen tells of Kitau who came to ask for a job as a domestic servant. He was hired but Dinesen was surprised when just three months later, he asked for a letter of reference as he wished to go work for a Muslim who lived nearby. Dinesen offered to raise his pay but he was not leaving for higher pay. He told her that he was deciding whether to become a Christian or a Muslim so he wanted to see how each one lived and behaved in order to make his choice. Dinesen wrote that she wished she’d known that when he first came to live with her.

How many of us would feel the same way? How many of us would behave differently if we knew we were being observed as representative Christians? A parishioner once told my mother that she’d like to put a Jesus fish on her car but she didn’t want people identifying her—and more to the point, her driving—as Christian. But Jesus tells us here that it is our *love* that identifies us as Christian. He doesn’t say, “you gotta believe x, y, and z to be a Christian.” The first creed won’t be written until

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<sup>5</sup> Greg Mortensen and David Oliver Relin, *Three Cups of Tea* (New York: Penguin Books, 2007), 219.

<sup>6</sup> D. A. Carson, *The Gospel According to John* (Leicester, England: APOLLOS, 1991), 484.

the fourth century. Jesus doesn't say, "you gotta do this and that" to be a Christian. We don't dress a certain way, we don't have to do anything in particular things to be identified as Christian. Jesus says, all you have to do is love one another and by this you will be identified as Christian. All we have to do is love one another. So simple and yet so difficult. All we have to do is love one another.

When it comes to matters of disagreements regarding beliefs or practice or any other of the many things that we as Christians may disagree with one another, it is important to remember this new commandment to love one another. Love is the common denominator (or should be) of all Christians, regardless of how we may disagree on other matters.

Jesus tells his followers to love one another, as a key for getting through the fearful and difficult times they were about to encounter. And it is also a key for us. Two thousand years later, we still have plenty to be fearful of: financial difficulties as individuals, as a church, as a nation; environmental crises from oil spills to climate change; natural disasters; the future of the country; the future of the church. But Jesus tells us, "Little children, love one another as I have loved you. Love one another and you will have nothing to fear. Love one another and everyone will know that you are my followers."

This commandment, the love command, is not just a nice idea. It's not just the "cherry on top" of a pious lifestyle. It's not optional. It is a command. We will be known by our love not by any other way of promoting our faith. LPC does love pretty well. We're good at loving each other, we great at loving those in need throughout our community and beyond but we can love more. As individuals and as a church let us commit ourselves to building a community of love, fostering a community of love. In doing so, both the community and the love will grow. By this, everyone will know us.