

A New Commandment

John 13: 31 – 35

May 2, 2010

I. Introduction

A. Perhaps you have heard of someone, or been asked the question yourself –

1. If you could choose what you would like to have written on your gravestone
 - a. What would you most want to be remembered for?

A. Last Sunday, we read the story from Acts 9 about a woman named Dorcas

1. Who was remembered in her death as a person who was
 - a. “Devoted to good works and acts of charity”

(1) I think that would be a pretty good epitaph for a tombstone

A. And in our text for today, we find another phrase that would lend itself well, I believe –

1. In fact, I can't think of anything I would rather have said about me, than -
 - a. “A disciple of Jesus Christ, known for his love for others”

A. However, Jesus doesn't give this instruction to his disciples

1. To be used only as an inscription on a tombstone after their death
 - a. He gives it as a motto to be lived by
2. And I believe it is just as relevant for us today as it was for those first disciples
 - a. I am leaving you now, Jesus said, but I leave you with this commandment

(1) A new commandment, or a new challenge

3. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another

a. That's how people will be able to look at you and know that you are my followers

(1) Not because of the clothes you are wearing

b. Not because you are some important, well-known person in the church

(1) Not even because of some great work you are doing for God

c. But you will be known by the attitude of your heart

(1) And the simple acts of love and kindness that you show

(a) To your sisters and brothers in the faith, and to other people around you

A. By this, everyone will know that you are a follower of Jesus

1. If you have love for one another

A. A new commandment? Probably not a totally new idea to those first disciples

1. And surely not a new thought for most of us here this morning

A. But for those disciples, who walked with Jesus and learned from him

1. Who watched how he interacted with the whole range of people
 - a. From the rich and powerful to the lowest of the lowly
 2. Jesus' way of living and loving others was new in many respects
 - a. At least, it was new in respect to the fact that it went so far beyond
 - (1) The natural love that we might naturally show to those we are closest to
 3. It was new in the way that Jesus' love was extended to perfect strangers
 - a. To people that we might more naturally feel envious of –
 - (1) The wealthy politicians and tax collectors of his day
 - b. As well as to people that we might tend to avoid
 - (1) Because they are so different, or we don't agree with their lifestyle
 - (a) Or who seem to be beyond even the reach of God's love
- A. Jesus' way of love was new and different from the way most of us love
1. Because it was costly, it was sacrificial – not just when he died
 - a. But all through his life, Jesus acted in ways that demonstrated his love
 - (1) Even when he was criticized for it, even when it took him beyond
 - (a) The norms of the society in which he lived
 2. Even when he felt himself pushed to the limits of physical and emotional endurance
 - a. Jesus' way of love compelled him to do the loving thing
 - (1) Rather than taking the easy way out and ignoring the needs
 - (a) The hurts and the troubles of the people around him
- A. I think of Zaccheus, the tax collector who wanted to see Jesus
1. Despised by many of his neighbors, probably envied by more than a few
 - a. Jesus went out of his way to speak to him, ate with him in his home
 - (1) And by his love, challenged Zaccheus to change his own way of life
- A. And the woman at the well in Samaria, a territory many Jews would have avoided
1. It might seem to us that it was a simple thing that Jesus did
 - a. Asking this woman for water to drink
 2. But it would have been much easier to simply ignore her
 - a. She's a Samaritan, she looks different, she believes strange things about God
 - (1) Men don't speak to women in these situations
 3. But Jesus did, and not only this woman, but her whole village was touched
 - a. By the compassion of this traveling teacher
- A. I think of the crowd that Jesus fed with the five loaves and two fishes

1. The reasonable thing to do, as the disciples suggested, was to send them away
 - a. So that they could find food to eat before sundown
 - (1) After all, these were people who were capable of providing for themselves
 2. But Jesus felt compassion, and he saw the situation as an opportunity for ministry
 - a. Rather than a lack of good sense as we might have seen it
- A. And I think of the time when parents were bringing their children to Jesus
1. Hoping that his blessing would bring a better future for their offspring
 - a. The disciples could easily dismiss their desire as frivolous
 - (1) Not worthy of Jesus' time or attention
 2. But Jesus cared, and extended a special invitation for children of all ages
 - a. To enter into the kingdom of heaven
 3. I can only imagine how much his blessing meant to those children and their parents
- A. We could go on, I'm sure you can remember other stories from scripture
1. That help us understand the love that Jesus showed during his lifetime
- A. And now, Jesus says to his disciples and to us, you go and love as I have loved
1. I'd like to invite us this morning to think of ways we have seen that love of Jesus
 - a. Expressed in the lives your brothers and sisters today
 2. Be thinking about that, and perhaps you have a story you could share with us
 - a. During the sharing time in a little while
- A. Mother Teresa, who many of us might think of as an example of a sacrificial love
1. Is quoted as saying - I have found the paradox that if I love until it hurts, then there is no more hurt, but only more love.
 2. That's the "new commandment" kind of love that Jesus was talking about
 - a. And she exemplified it in a lifetime of service to the poorest of the poor
 - (1) In the slums of the city of Calcutta, India
- A. But not every act of love has to be some great act of sacrifice
1. Richard Foster, author of a number of books on Christian spirituality, says –
 - a. One of the greatest expressions of love is simply to notice people and to pay attention to them.
 2. And yes, when we actually take the time to notice the people around us
 - a. We may find that we see more opportunity for giving of ourselves
 - (1) That's why it can be easier to not get involved sometimes
 3. But if we have experienced God's love, and it is in our hearts, it will find its way out

- A. John, the disciple who recorded these words of Jesus in our text
 - 1. Would later write, in one of his letters - "If a man says he loves God and loves not his brother, he's a liar, because if you haven't loved your brother whom you have seen, how can you love God whom you've not seen?"
 - 2. That's where "the rubber hits the road" as the saying goes
 - a. For those who make the claim that we are Christians, followers of Jesus
- A. There's a reason why Jesus calls this a commandment to love
 - 1. It is not a suggestion, or an option that we can choose to follow
 - a. It is in response to God's love, and if it isn't ingrained into our lives
 - (1) Then John says, our whole relationship with God is in trouble
 - b. It is very similar, in fact, to the scripture where Jesus says
 - (1) That we are to forgive as we have been forgiven
 - 2. In fact, love and forgiveness, or love and grace, often go hand in hand
- A. Dottie and I have experienced an outpouring of love from this congregation
 - 1. From the very beginning of our time here, and even before then
 - a. I think of the box of my favorite cereal, and jar of my favorite jelly
 - (1) Waiting on the table at Ed and Joyce Taylor's on one of our visits
 - 2. I think of the carton of Mountain Dew that showed up at our housewarming
 - a. And all the other gifts and notes of appreciation that we have received
 - 3. But over time, the love that will mean the most will be the times
 - a. When by words or actions, I will cause some offense
 - (1) I have no doubt it will happen, and may well have happened already
 - b. And your response could very well be criticism or blame
 - (1) But instead, you choose to forgive and seek reconciliation
 - 4. That will be the love that truly makes a difference – in my life
 - a. In the life of the congregation
 - (1) And it will be the love that causes people around us to say -
 - b. Those people are different, they are really living out Jesus' way of love
 - (1) And that will be the most attractive witness we can give to our world
- A. Sometimes we simply need to be shaken out of our complacency
 - 1. Reminded of the fragile nature of our lives before we take seriously
 - a. Our obligation to love even the strangers that we meet
- A. Someone has suggested that people in an intensive care waiting room

1. Often act in a manner that is totally different from what we are used to
- A. I have experienced that myself at times – when strangers talk to each other
 1. And inquire about the friend or family member who may be undergoing surgery
 - a. Or experiencing some other health issue
- A. When faced with the reality of life or death issues, people will often overlook
 1. The barriers of race or class, wealth or poverty, that can keep us apart
 - a. Under normal circumstances
- A. Perhaps we should take a lesson from that, and learn to live with that level of caring
 1. Before we find ourselves face to face with our own mortality
- A. I may have mentioned this before, I can't remember
 1. But studies have shown that the primary reason people visit bars
 - a. Is not for the beverages that can be purchased there
 - (1) You can buy them in lots of places and take them home to drink if you want
 2. But the real reason for congregating in a tavern or a bar
 - a. Is because of loneliness, and the perception that after a few drinks
 - (1) You can let down your guard, be your real self, say what you want
 - (a) And nobody is going to take offense or be critical
 3. You can leave all your worries and fears behind, at least for a few hours
 - a. You can talk about situations with friends or strangers alike
 - (1) That you would be embarrassed to share anyplace else
 4. The worst that can happen is that you'll have a hangover in the morning
- A. Radio and TV evangelist Chuck Swindoll has even suggested that the neighborhood bar is possibly the best counterfeit that there is to the fellowship Christ wants to give his church. It's an imitation, he says, dispensing liquor instead of grace, escape rather than reality--but it is a permissive, accepting, and inclusive fellowship.
 1. But before we become too defensive, perhaps we should ask ourselves
 - a. Can we allow people to be real when they come to church on Sunday morning
 2. Can we share the really troubling things of life – the addiction to pornography
 - a. The struggles in our marriage, the dishonesty, envy or greed that we deal with
 - (1) The moral and ethical decisions that are a part of our work life
 3. Can we find a place to share that kind of thing
 - a. Among the people who claim to be followers of Jesus
 - (1) And hope to find the true love and grace that we long for

- 4. Are we prepared to help someone deal with those kinds of deep concerns
 - a. And do so in a non-critical, non-judgmental way of love and caring
 - (1) That says – I know where you can find healing and hope
 - (a) And I'm willing to walk with you there
 - A. I sometimes think that if only we could figure out how to accept others
 - 1. The way we believe Jesus loves and accepts us – warts and all
 - a. We would have people knocking down our church doors
 - (1) To experience that love and grace
- II. This year, we as a congregation have adopted the motto – “Welcome to the Table”
- A. You will see it printed in our bulletins each Sunday
 - 1. It's a motto that I have seen practiced here at Sonnenberg many times
 - A. But I would encourage us not to be satisfied with the ways of welcoming others
 - 1. That we are already practicing and perhaps feel comfortable with
 - A. Instead, let's look for new ways to invite people in
 - 1. Let's explore what it might take, or what we might need to do
 - a. In order for the stranger who comes in to feel comfortable joining us
 - A. And let's take seriously what it means for each one of us
 - 1. To follow Jesus' command to love each other
 - a. That's where it all starts, if we want to become known in our world
 - (1) As disciples of Jesus; as people who love the way Jesus loved