

First Trinity Lutheran Church  
April 28, 2013  
John 13:31-35

### **Love One Another**

So here we are in the Easter season of the church year and we have this reading from John Chapter 13. This is one of the better known Bible passages today because it contains Jesus' famous "love command." The passage is so familiar that most people assume they know it before they hear it. Moreover, what can you really add to "love another" – words that are simultaneously ridiculously easy to understand and ridiculously hard to do?

John begins Chapter 13 with the account of the Last Supper, just before Jesus is to be arrested and tried. It seems me that this passage which also is read on Holy Thursday during Holy week would be more appropriate to that time than now on the fifth Sunday of Easter. But then I was not consulted when the lectionary was put together. As this particular passage commences, Jesus has already washed the feet of his disciples, Judas has just departed to betray him, and the rest of the disciples are in a state of confusion. At just this moment of drama and tension, Jesus' offers these words, "I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another.

This tells us, I think, a great deal about the kind of love Jesus is talking about. This surely isn't romantic love, nor is it simply being nice kind of love, nor is it just loving those who love you back. Think about it: when Jesus washed his disciples' feet, Judas was there. Further, he will now demonstrate just how much God loves the world by dying for those who seriously do not love him. Love is hard because it is self-sacrificing. It means putting the good of the other first, even when it hurts.

I find it striking that these are the words Jesus' leaves with his disciples. I mean, he could have said, "Go out and die with me." Or, "keep the faith." Or, "when I am gone go out

and teach and preach to all the world.” He could have said any number of things. But instead he offered this simple and challenging word, “love another.” Why? Because this kind of love is the hallmark not just of God and Jesus but also of the Christian church. As in the old camp song, Jesus agrees that the whole world will know we are Christians not by our sermons or our sacraments or our festivals or our buildings or our crucifixes or our family values ... but by our love. It’s just that important.

It may strike us as strange that love can be commanded. Let us remember that we have a covenant with Christ that is sealed with his blood. If we are to live as chosen people, there are certain stipulations we have to observe, certain obligations that we must fulfill. From the Ten Commandments, for example, that we know what we are forbidden to do if we want to be in covenant, if we are to be faithful to God. Don’t worship false gods, don’t skip church, don’t take another’s life, don’t play fast and loose with sex, don’t take what doesn’t belong to you, don’t speak badly of another, don’t lust don’t, don’t don’t.

Believe it or not the don’t are not at the center of Christianity. What is central to Christianity is what every don’t points to. The don’ts point to an activity that is a threat to love, or the reverse of that, or a refusal of love. For example, if I do not respect my parents or steal something then certainly I would not be showing love. We see these refusals to love throughout the Gospels. A priest in the story of the Good Samaritan sees a half-dead victim and ignores him. Judas sells Jesus for 30 piece of silver. Peter denying that he knows Jesus. Herod beheading John the Baptist to please a dancing girl. The Scribes and Pharisees who neglect to do justice and mercy. What makes these actions sins is ultimately they are refusals to love.

The key to understanding this love is understanding the motivation. It is not something we have to do, but something we get to do. It is a gift. You don’t acquire it by

human effort, by wanting it, by being the best you can be through your own efforts. It comes from God through Jesus to those who believe in him.

Sometimes the love command seems so challenging we assume it's an ideal, a lofty goal that none of us will ever reach. But while we may not love perfectly, we do love, and sometimes one of the most powerful things you can hear in relation to this command to love one another is our ability to keep it. I'm sure this past week you chose to love someone. Perhaps it was looking out for the interests of a colleague, or overlooking the fact that a friend of yours said something unkind to you, or putting aside your own goals to help someone else achieve theirs. Maybe it was a large act of love, or maybe it was much smaller. But each of us, I'd wager, did in fact "love one another" this past week. On the other hand I'm sure there was a situation this week where you found it difficult to love someone. Maybe it's been incredibly hard to forgive someone who has hurt you, or difficult to move beyond the disappointment caused by a family member or friend. The truth is that we do love, regularly, and we do fail, regularly. And this is a place where we can give thanks for the former and pray about the later

Today we join thousands of Lutheran Churches across the United States who are observing Malaria Sunday. Now this Malaria campaign is not something we have to get involved with. Malaria is not something that effects too many in the people in the US. Maybe about 1,500 per year. But in Africa Malaria is a major killer. Every minute one person dies of malaria, and the vast majority of these are children under five and pregnant women. Malaria death cost Africa approximately \$12 billion a year in cost productivity. The disease increase school absenteeism, decreases tourism, and even affects the type of crops that a grown. And this decease can be stopped. Through early diagnosis and prompt treatment can shorten the infection and save lives. Malaria also can be prevented by the simple use of mosquito nets because most bites from mosquitoes occur at night when

families are sleeping. Mosquito nets are inexpensive and can reduce the transmission by as much as 90%. The campaign goal is to raise 15 million over the next two years. I understand that over 6 million has already been raised and that is great. This is another way that we can love our neighbor, and it will save lives.

Today Oscar Daniel will be baptized with the water and the word, but more importantly in the name of Father, and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Baptism is another way that God connects us to his love. Because above and beyond Jesus' command to love is his actual *act* of love. Jesus goes to the cross to demonstrate that, in fact, "God so loved the world." Jesus did not go to the cross to make God loving, or to satisfy God's justice, or to take on our punishment. Jesus went to the cross to show in word and deed that God is love and that Oscar and all of us, as God's children, are loved. So whether we succeed or fail in our attempts to love one another this week, God in Jesus loves us more than we can possible imagine. So again today in response to God love we are set free to once again love another.

Amen