

SERMON KUC MAY 15, 2022

By Marion Boyd

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts bring us closer together in our understanding of God's love for the world.

Our Scripture today is key to our understanding how Jesus wanted his disciples to understand and to act the love of God, embodied in his only son. The passage from John 13 occurs just after the disciples eat their last meal with Jesus. Jesus has just said that one among them will betray him and confides in the beloved disciple to his right hand that he will dip a piece of bread and feed it to the one who will do so. He feeds the bread to Judas and then sends him out, ostensibly to seek supplies. But Jesus knows that Judas is the betrayer and our passage occurs the minute he is gone.

Jesus tells the disciples, "Now the Son of Man is glorified and God has been glorified in him." The die is cast and Jesus knows that his death will follow quickly. This may be his last chance to talk frankly to his disciples, to give them his wisdom and assure them of his abiding love, for them and for all humanity. The next two chapters are often referred to as Jesus' farewell speech. Jesus calls the disciples "little children" suggesting that he loves them as a parent; he has nurtured them and taught them by word and by deed that God's love has no limits or boundaries and that their task is to convey this message through action when he is gone.

Jesus has told them many times that he won't be with them in the same way soon. While they cannot follow where Jesus is going, they can live as he has taught. He gives them a new commandment: "*love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you*

are my disciples, if you have love for one another.” We have heard the command to love one another over and over. How is this a new command? Even in Leviticus, which laid out the strict rules of Hebrew behaviour, we are told to “love your neighbour as yourself.” So, what is “New”?

For Leviticus, the neighbour is a Jew, a faithful follower of all the strictures on behaviour, on food consumption and on commitment to build a strong, protected and unified community. For Jesus, love was not a path of strict rules, but rather it is a call to action on behalf of all God’s people. It is through our deeds that others will come to realize the inclusive depth and breadth of God’s everlasting love. It is a command to put the love of God into action, to strive to do God’s merciful justice even in the face of wickedness and hate. We are commanded to love not only those we like, but everyone. We are not to confine our love to those who share our pews, or live in our town or country, or share our race or language our orientation or our political views. God loves all of creation and Jesus is calling us, through our actions, to love one another just as he has loved us. It is important to remember that this passage follows immediately on Judas’ exit to carry out his betrayal and is followed by the prediction that Peter will deny him three times before the cock crows. Yet, Jesus includes both Judas, the betrayer, and Peter, the denier, in his embrace of love.

When we read our Scripture from Acts, we see Peter acting on this commandment. In Chapter 10, we read the story of Peter and his followers in Antioch and how they converted the Gentile Cornelius and his family to Christianity. But in Chapter 11, when Peter returns to Jerusalem, the circumcised believers, Jews who had been won over to the Way of Christ, criticize Peter for consorting with uncircumcised men and even eating their food. So Peter clearly explains to them, step by step, what led to his action. He outlines how, as he was praying in the town of Joppa, God sent him a vision of a white, sheet-like object descending

from heaven by its four corners. When Peter looked more closely, he saw the sheet was filled with animals and birds of all sorts. Then a voice told him to rise, kill and eat these animals. Such a suggestion shocked Peter, a good Jew who followed the food rules of his faith and he refused to eat what he described as “profane and unclean”. But the voice told him that God had made them clean. This same thing was repeated three times. When the three men from Caesarea arrived, the Spirit told Peter to go with them and make no distinction between them and us. Peter and six of his followers accompanied the strangers to the house of Cornelius, a Gentile believer. Cornelius told of his vision of an angel in his house, ordering him to bring Peter to him and his household.

Peter began to speak, to tell them of Jesus. Then, as the passage relays, “Holy Spirit fell upon them, just as it had upon us, (meaning the disciples) at the beginning.” Peter saw that Gentiles though they were, they believed the message of Jesus. Peter tells the circumcised believers that he then baptized them with water and with the Spirit. Peter states that “If God gave them the same gift he gave us when we believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I that I could hinder God?” And their criticism was silenced.

But that was not to be the end of the story. There continued to be resistance among the circumcised believers to the admission of the Gentiles to the faith. While this incident was a breakthrough for Peter and his followers, those who continued Jesus’ ministry of loving all as neighbours continued to face opposition from Jewish Christians who thought only the circumcised who followed the rules of the Hebrew faith should be admitted to the faith.

Although we only hear from Peter one more time in Acts, he had made a breakthrough in his own understanding of Jesus’ way. He had realized that the strictures of the Jewish law were hampering the ability to evangelize as Jesus’ required. Soon Peter’s

leadership of the church would be superseded by the Paul's ministry, which spread the good news of Jesus far and wide in the Mediterranean world.

The message for us as Christians in the 21st century is clear. All God's people are his beloved children. We are called to live out the love that Jesus commanded in our lives, to act on our love. Christ wants us to love as he loved, to include the unlovable in our efforts, to do the hard work of truly loving our neighbour. Many answer the call. It is amazing to see the courage and resolve of those bringing aid to those in need in Ukraine, Sudan, Central Africa, Myanmar and elsewhere. In our own country, those who strive for equality and justice among the marginalized. To those who share our faith and those who don't, through our actions we show that we are Christ's disciples. In every place, in every circumstance, at whatever age we attain, we are called to act out the love of God among God's people. Some have resources they can share, others can offer physical labour, still others have the ideas and skills that spark progress, while others have only their limited words and gestures to others. We can all contribute. Sure, we will make mistakes. Sometimes our ideas and efforts are not appreciated. At other times, the unintended consequences of our efforts to love far outweigh our original intent. But as long as we try to put the love of God into everything we do, we are striving to be Christ's disciples.

To love as Christ commands is the work of our lifetime. May it ever be so.