

“Choosing Love”

John 13:31-36

Easter 5C, April 17, 2019

A Sermon for Every Sunday

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Short passage; big message. Love one another. Love one another. Love one another. Any questions?

This is how I once heard a preacher describe these few verses from John’s gospel, which begin a long stretch of scripture called the Farewell Discourse and where we find Jesus’ final words to and prayers for his disciples.

In John 13 Jesus has washed the feet of the disciples and is preparing them to carry on the movement after he is gone—and this short passage with a big message is the “new commandment” Jesus gives his followers to embody. But it turns out the “love one another” part of this commandment isn’t what’s new. As my dear friend Rev. Alan Sherouse reminded me, the commandment to love goes back much further than Jesus of Nazareth. Before Jesus spoke the commandment gathered around that last night with the disciples, it was rehearsed throughout the Jewish tradition. Many of the disciples knew it, read it, prayed it, and committed their lives to it. The commandment to love one another was familiar to them—old, not new—that is until the qualifying phrase: “**As I have loved you....**” Now that part was new—Just as I have loved you, you also should love another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.” Short passage with a big message. An old commandment with a new meaning.

After losing his job in 2010 amateur photographer, Brandon Stanton, moved to New York and began an ambitious project: to photograph 10,000 New Yorkers on the street and create an exhaustive catalogue of the city’s inhabitants. Armed with his camera, he began crisscrossing the city, covering thousands of miles on foot, all in an attempt to capture New Yorkers. Somewhere along the way he began to interview his subjects in addition to photographing them. He asks one of two questions, which seem to open the doors into people’s lives: “What is your greatest struggle?” or “Give me one piece of advice.” Alongside their portraits he includes quotes and short stories from their lives. Brandon’s portraits and captions became a blog “Humans of New York” and now the project has over 20 million followers on social media.

One of the Humans of New York helped Brandon understand his project is really about the power of stories. She was older woman photographed with wisps of grey hair sticking out from a furry cap, with a little bit of mascara under her wrinkled eyes, and fuzzy umbrella in the background. She said,

“When my husband was dying, I said: ‘Moe, how am I supposed to live without you?’

He told me: “Take the love you have for me and spread it around.”

Isn't that just beautiful? Take the love you have for me and spread it around.

How are the disciples supposed to live when Jesus is no longer with them in body?

This is what Jesus commands the disciples to do: Take the love I've shown you and pour it out in the world. “Just as I have loved you...you also should love one another.”

In fact Jesus gives no other ethical imperative in the Fourth Gospel—no turn the other cheek or walk a second mile or give away your cloak. Just love one another. Jesus hopes to live on in the world in the love of his followers—not just their love for him, but their love for one another.

“Take the love I've poured out for you, the love you've felt from me, and pour it out in the world.” Pour it out on the people around you—strangers and friends. From the cashier at the grocery store to the difficult family member. Take the love I've shown you, and extend it to the people around you. Every day. In every interaction. To every creature in every place. Take the love you've known through me, and give it away again and again and again. And you'll never run out of love like that. And your life and the life of your community can't help but point to God and God's Way of Love.

[Story on Sam, WaWa, someone in line paying for person behind them. See video]

Then a church member told me they were in the drive through at Starbucks when they read in our church newsletter about the gift cards being distributed, which prompted this family to pay for the order of the person behind them in line! It was like a cascade of generosity and love was pouring out into the world.

But sometimes love is harder than this.

Every week at the end of worship I say this as a part of my benediction to the congregation: “go to join in the work of God in your every day living. Go to dream with God about what is possible in the face of the impossible. Go to love deeply and unreservedly even when love is hard to come by.”

Certainly, the disciples found themselves in lots of places in which love was hard to come by following Jesus' death. They were fearful, anxious, concerned about how they would carry on the message of Jesus and if they would be persecuted.

You and I don't have to think long or hard to know the places in our lives or world in which love is hard to come by—in our relationships with co-workers or family members, when we've been disappointed or hurt by someone, in our politics, and even in some corners of our churches.

In the disciples' best moments and ours, we remember how we are supposed to live even when or especially when love is hard to come by—we remember the new part of the new commandment: “Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another.”

Henri Nouwen wrote, “If we wait for a feeling of love before loving, we may never learn to love well. Mostly we know the loving thing to do. When we ‘do’ love, even if others are not able to respond with love, we will discover that our feelings catch up with our acts.”

The kind of love Jesus commands of the disciples is the defining characteristic of God and Jesus' life—it is also the defining characteristic of the Christian church—to show God's love to the world in every way we can think of. To keep the currency of God's love moving around in the world long after that last night Jesus had with the disciples. To be vectors of the love we've known in Christ and to embody it in our daily living—our texts and emails, our calls and connections, in our interactions and in our difficult conversations—this is the new commandment for us.

St. Jerome, one of the Latin Church Fathers, wrote about how John in his old age would remind those around him to love one another. When he was asked why he said this so often, he replied, “Because it is what our Lord commanded. If it is all you do, it is enough.”

A short passage with a big commandment. An old commandment with a new meaning. “As I have loved you.” Living the way Jesus lived, Choosing love even when love is hard to come by. Extending love when people are unlovely. Taking the love God has for you and pouring it out, giving love away again and again. For it is enough. If it is all we do, it is enough. It is generative. And it is our life's work.

This big new commandment would be enough to sustain the disciples as they figured out how to live after Jesus was gone. And it is enough to sustain us through challenging times. Each time we choose love, we bear witness to God's all-encompassing and radical love for all the world. May God give us the grace to allow such love to be the defining characteristic of our lives and our communities. Amen.

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