

Ordered to Love

May 6, 2007

Fifth Sunday of Eastertide

John 13:34-35

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I give you a new commandment, that you love each other. Just as I have loved you, you also should love each other. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another. John 13:34-35

A few years ago we were vacationing in the Virgin Islands. Charlene, Jessie, Harry and I were feeling very fortunate and enjoying every second. It was the beginning of August, not the most popular time to head for the Caribbean, and we were staying at a campground, not necessarily the most popular Caribbean destination. The result of all that was that there were moments we felt like we had the place to ourselves.

One such moment, in the morning, we went down to the beach to swim and make drip castles. We were the only ones on the beach, and the beach was pretty big. We were working on the greatest, biggest castle in the world when a family we'd never seen before came down the steps to the beach.

Charlene and I had the exact same reaction. Man! I knew this was too good to last. There goes the beach!

Jessie, who was 5 at the time, had a whole different reaction: She looked up. She jumped up! She said, "Look, new friends!" And she tore off down the beach to greet them.

I've been in churches that were both ways. Churches that greet newcomers and visitors with a silent and unconscious mutter, "There goes the beach..." And churches where people leap out of their seats and run with a cry: "New friends!"

I'll give you a guess about which kind of church Jesus would prefer to visit.

In today's gospel lesson, Jesus is with his disciples, sitting down for what is going to be his last supper. He has a lot to say. In fact he goes on for nearly 5 chapters. He wants to give his followers instructions about how to follow him when he's no longer around to be followed physically. He wants to give his followers instructions about how to be the church.

As my old teacher Raymond Brown puts it, "Since the disciples cannot follow Jesus as he leaves this life, they receive a command that, if obeyed, will keep the spirit of Jesus alive among them as they continue their life in this world." Jesus intends to live on in these, his followers, those who will become the living body of Christ. And he has a way to do it. By ordering them to love.

In the two verses we are looking at today, the verses in your bulletin, Jesus comes to the heart of what it's all about. He tells them that following him and being the community of Jesus comes down to one little word: *αγαπάτε* (agapáte), to love. Three things to note about this word. First, he uses it 4 times in 2 verses, so he wants them, and us, to pay attention. Second, it's a verb, not a noun. More on that in a minute. Third, it's in the second person. It means: you love, and it is indeed in the form of a command. The followers of Jesus are ordered to love.

We have a funny idea about love in our culture. We talk about it a lot, but we talk about it in a funny way. We, too, use it as a verb, but rarely as an active verb. When I say to you, I love you, I'm not really describing something I'm doing to you, am I? It's almost like I'm describing not anything I'm doing, but something that's being done to me, that I have little control over or input into. I'm passively observing some emotional state inside me that makes me want to be with you, spend time with you, or, in a darker sense, makes me want to possess you or have some control over you.

Wow. That is so completely not how Jesus is using that word.

Jesus uses the word love only as an active verb. He's saying, I'm loving you, and not in that McDonald's sense ("I'm loving it!"). He's saying I am actively loving you by

speaking to you, teaching you, spending time with you, feeding you and, in this particular chapter of the Gospel of John, by doing something as personal and distasteful as washing your feet. I love you by doing what I'm doing.

We don't have so very much control over love the way we think about love. In the way we think about love, the idea of Jesus ordering us to love sounds silly. If I say to you, please love the person next to you, in addition to probably making you uncomfortable, I'm probably sounding foolish. You might say to me, I don't know this person, how can I love her? You might say, I do know this person and I really don't like him, how can I love him. Jesus would answer, "Really easily. Watch what I'm doing. Do what I'm doing. I'll teach you. Then you do the same. "A new command I am giving to you: that you love each other the way I am loving you." Then, people will recognize you as mine.

Okay, but two questions remain. First, why is this a new commandment, and the second is, whether old or new, how do we do it? How do we fulfill it?

This command is not new on its face. There are plenty of commandments among the 613 in what we call the Old Testament that could be translated, Love each other. But Jesus is giving them this command, this order, for a specific purpose: "By this everyone will know that you are my followers, if you love each other." Jesus is anxious that everyone be able to recognize him in this new community he is leaving behind. He hopes that they will recognize him by the way his followers love.

And how do we fulfill that commandment? Well, I think we need practice. Even in the jolliest church, and surely this is among the jolliest churches I've been around, even in the jolliest and most loving communities of the body of Christ, there are people who don't know each other; there are people who don't know how to know each other, there are even—I know this will come as a complete and total shock—there are even people who don't like each other. And sometimes this gets in the way of our loving. And so sometimes it's hard to recognize us as the body of Christ!

So we'll practice. We'll practice in 5 ways.

First we'll **pray**. The best way to start loving someone is to start praying for them. We can do that right now. Think of somebody sharing this room right now who you'd like to pray for. You can pick someone you don't know yet, or pick someone you don't like yet, but pick someone. Everyone have somebody? Look at me when you have somebody. I won't call on you and ask who it is.

Think about her or his life, her well-being, his transformation. Please pray. If you're unsure of how to pray, join the crowd, but please try anyway. God is used to amateur pray-ers. We all are!

(prayers) Please look at me again when you are done.

Second, in a few minutes we'll have the chance to stand and pass the **Peace of Christ**. This act was originally designed as a way to reconcile with people before you commune with them. And it still works that way. But in case that feels too intimidating, at least make sure to greet two people you don't yet know, and extend the Peace to them. Love requires action.

Third, today is communion Sunday. **Communion** is the act when the body of Christ shares the body of Christ in order to grow as the body of Christ. Communion literally means an act of sharing in intimate relationship. It involves not only the intimate relationship between you and God—if it were just that you could stay home and do it—but the intimate relationship between you and everyone else in this room, and also, though it seems overwhelming, between you and every other follower of Jesus, living and dead. That's a lot of loving!

Fourth, at the end of communion we'll be joined by the folks from **West-Park Presbyterian** Church, who will be without a home for the next two years, and will seek a home here where we are at home. You can react in two ways: there goes the beach, or look, new friends! I'll leave that up to you.

And when the service is over, think about how else you are going to fulfill the commandment to love. Maybe you'll stay for coffee hour. Maybe you'll join the mission study or the young adult brunch or the youth group meeting today, or come with us to the meeting of MIND this afternoon to see if we can help convince the United Methodist Church to fulfill the commandment to love. Lots of ways to love. But even if you have to scoot, do this: do some love on the way home. And spend this week practicing.

Spend this week doing love. And see if anybody recognizes you.