

***A sermon preached on May 19<sup>th</sup>, 2019 based upon John 13:31-35.***

Judas has left to meet those who will arrest Jesus. The clock is ticking. Jesus will in short order be dying on the cross. It is time for some last instructions for his disciples as he prepares for his departure from them.

He addresses his disciples with such tenderness: *“Little Children.”* Grown men, but he sees their vulnerability and frailty. *“I give you a new commandment, that you 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.”*

People often think Christianity is a religion with a lot of rules. But there is only this single commandment -- simple enough for a child to understand; and yet so profound and demanding that we can't help but acknowledge how often we fall short.

The *“love one another”* part wasn't what was new. The golden rule already existed in the Hebrew Scriptures. The “new part” was the reference point Jesus gave when he added *“as I have loved you.”* This is *“whole hearted”* love. It is loving actions, yes, but not only actions. This love engages the heart as well as the mind. It encompasses compassion and the vulnerability that goes with being willing to feel the pain of others.

To a remarkable extent the early church succeeded in keeping this commandment. Around 120 AD a Greek Philosopher named Aristides wrote the following words describing what he had observed in local Christians in a letter to the Roman: *“They love one another. They never fail to help widows; they save orphans from those who hurt them. If they have something, they give freely to the person who has nothing; if they see a stranger, they take him home as a brother or sister in the spirit, the Spirit of God.”* Not surprisingly, the philosopher converted to Christianity having witnessed the truth of the Gospel in the love lived out by Christ's followers.

Two hundred years later when emperor Constantine converted to Christianity, one of the things that caught his attention was the way Christians moved towards, rather than away from person afflicted by the terrible plague.

The early church provided an example of radical inclusion to the larger society. The Christian community was strikingly diverse. Traditional boundaries that separated people of class and race were overcome.

But the witness of Christianity wouldn't have gotten very far if it weren't for a barrier that was overcome early on in the life of the church – a story recorded in the Book of Acts that was one of the readings assigned to this Sunday. The very first Christians were all

Jews and simply assumed that in order to be a Christian you first had to be a Jew – keeping all the Kosher laws, the requirement that men be circumcised and such.

Acts includes the story of how the Holy Spirit inspired a vision given to the Apostle Peter that led him to accept the invitation to go to the home of some Gentile searchers and share the good news of Jesus, at which point he witnessed them receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. When Peter returned to Jerusalem, he was lambasted by the other apostles for sharing a meal with Gentiles. *How could you do such a thing! Sure he commanded us to love, but there is always a “yes, but...”* “Yes, but you surely don’t mean Gentiles?!”

In response Peter told them the story of how the Holy Spirit revealed to him that the wall between Gentiles and Jews were overcome, and that yes, they were to love Gentiles as well. And they gave their assent to what God was doing, and the Gospel spread throughout the world.

*“This is how people will know you are my disciples: that you love one another.”*

Consider for a moment all the things Jesus could have said but didn’t regarding how people would know we are his disciples. The beliefs we espouse. How often we mention Jesus’ name. How often we go to church or read the Bible, as important as these things may be.

No, it wasn’t these things. It was by the width and depth of our love.

Through the centuries the church has often gone off the rails.

Only 2 in 10 Americans under the age of 30 believe attending a church is important or worthwhile, an all-low. Of those 80% who don’t, when asked about words they associate with Christians give the following responses:

91% said “anti-homosexual”

87% said “judgmental”

85% said “hypocritical”

70% said “insensitive to others”

Rachel Held Evans was a Christian writer who prematurely died last month way at the age of 37. She gained a great following writing about her experience leaving behind her fundamentalist upbringing to move into a broadly inclusive, expansively loving form of Christianity. One point she repeatedly emphasized was that attempts at reaching “millenials” by making church “cool” was altogether misguided. She wrote,

*“We millennials have been advertised to our entire lives, and we can tell when somebody is just trying to sell us something. I think church is the last place I want to go to be sold another product.”*

What millennials are looking for is authenticity. They are looking for the love Jesus commanded lived out with integrity.

This afternoon Greg Elbin and I are headed off to the annual conference of United Methodist of New Jersey. It is remarkable that these two passages of Scripture would appear in the lectionary on this particular day.

The United Methodist Church isn't "united". For the past fifty years the United Methodist Church has been steadily shrinking. It has also been steadily arguing over whether LGBTQ folks should be fully included, fully loved. The language of the Discipline has included a "yes, but" in relation to fully welcoming LGBTQ folks into the life of the church.

This conflict has come to a head. The Special Conference of the General Conference held back in February cost \$5 million and ended up doubling down on the unwelcoming language in the Discipline regarding the LGBTQ community. It was greatly disheartening.

I attended a special meeting convened by our bishop of pastors of Reconciling Congregations in our Conference. One of the things that the bishop said that struck me was that in the midst of this time of confusion and uncertainty the Special Conference had personally provided for him a great clarity. The United Methodist Church as we've known it simply isn't viable anymore, he said. It has essentially died. The question now is one of resurrection. What will arise from the ashes?

He said we would be mistaken to look to the General Conference to solve the present crisis. He is hopefully that we can find a way forward locally at the annual conference level – one that will allow churches such as ours to keep faith with the love that Jesus has commanded us to manifest in this world.

I don't want this sermon end with about finger pointing in regards to those Methodists who cling to the exclusionary language expressed in the Traditionalist Plan.

We too are challenged by Jesus' single commandment to love another as he has love us.

The spiritual power of our congregation is directly related to our willingness to carry out his commandment. So I want to challenge you on two fronts this morning.

The first regards this odd assortment of people who gather here to make up the Parsippany United Methodist Church – they're all a part of the fellowship that to which

you are charged to extend your love. Are there “Yes, buts” for you in this congregation? People you don’t really know – haven’t a clue regarding their sorrows or their joys? Of course there are. Are there people you are less inclined to extend yourself to in the passing of the peace? I expect so. What would it mean for you to take more seriously the commandment of Jesus to embody love in relation to these people?

The second front is in relation to those persons beyond the walls of our church. God has allowed us to finally pay off our mortgage for our beautiful sanctuary in the past year. Now is the time to begin to turn our focus outwards. How might we find more concrete, practical ways to love the people who are hurting in the larger community, both far and near. I made the point a couple of weeks ago that we live in the portion of the state with the highest rate with which young people take their own lives. How can we embody the love of God for young people who are tempted to despair?

For it is by our love that people will know that we are disciples of Jesus.