

Sunday May 18th, 2025

John 13:31-35
“New Command”

As you can all imagine, as I approach retirement, my mind is flooded with memories of events and people that I experienced over 38 years of being a minister. Some memories are good, like happy recollection of seeing the churches I have served do amazing things to help people. And yes, some memories bring back feelings of sadness such as leading funeral services as we gathered to say goodbye to friends we have known and loved.

Yet, one thing I have now realized after all this time is that I have the memory of an elephant. That’s right. I remember one time I went to the zoo and saw an elephant. Memories are important, critical actually and I am mindful of a quote that reads, “*Life can only be understood backwards but must be lived forwards.*” These words – from the Danish theologian, Soren Kierkegaard – came to mind as I thought about today’s Gospel reading.

We are reading this story which occurs on the night Jesus was betrayed, and yet oddly we also are reading it during the Easter season, after Jesus has died and been raised from the dead. But this reading tells us of an event that took place *before* that first Easter. We are doing, in a sense, what the disciples did. We are looking back at what Jesus did in his life on earth, in the light of his death and resurrection.

Everything that Jesus did here on earth can be better understood looking back, after the events that took place on Good Friday and Easter. That is what the disciples did, and that is what we are doing today and every time we gather to worship and examine God’s word. We live, as Jesus’ disciples, moving *forwards*. But we learn, sometimes, by looking *backwards*. Do you follow that thinking?

Today, we go back to John 13, to the night that Jesus was betrayed. We do this to think again about one of the core lessons Jesus taught. That is, Jesus’ teaching on love. We are doing this because Jesus’ teaching on love is worth re-thinking about after the events of Good Friday and Easter Sunday. It is important, before we even turn to Jesus’ words, to remember exactly *when* and *where* Jesus said these things.

Sometimes, when and where we say something is as important to the meaning as the actual words that we say. And that’s especially true in John 13. John 13 begins in the upper room. Jesus is there with all his disciples. All of them remember. Thomas, who will doubt the resurrection is there. Peter, who will deny knowing Jesus after he is arrested, is there. And Judas, who will betray Jesus and hand him over to those wanting to kill him, is there. And Jesus, knowing all that is to come, washed each of their feet.

Washing a person’s feet in that culture was the appointed task of a servant. We have probably heard this before. Jesus was humbling himself and doing the work of a servant here. But stop to think about what that means now, looking back. Jesus washed Judas’s feet, knowing he would betray him. He washed Peter’s feet, knowing he would deny knowing him. He washed Thomas’s feet, knowing he would doubt him. Jesus knew all this would happen. He predicted it. But he still got on his knees and washed their feet.

If you want a picture of love, picture Jesus on his knees, washing the feet of his betrayer, Judas. That's love, isn't it? And Jesus tells us that this is what we need to do for one another. Love one another, as he has loved us.

"I give you a new commandment, that you love one another just as I have loved you." Interesting phrase, isn't it? We might wonder, what's *new* about this commandment? The commandment to love wasn't new, of course. It's mentioned often in the Old Testament. The greatest commandment is to love God, and the next is to love our neighbor. These are repeated often in the Old Testament. They are not new. But Jesus' labels his commandment as new. What's new about it? Not love.

Yet there is something new here we might have missed. Jesus calls us to love just as he loved. The new part of this is that we are commanded to love one another just as Jesus has loved us. And that means loving those who doubt us, and deny knowing us, and even those who betray us. Because that's what Jesus did for us. He loved us, and loves us, even when we doubt, deny, or betray him. And now, simply put, he asks us to do the same for others. It's not always easy. But it is always important. Always commanded. And always should be done.

We are to love one another, as Jesus has loved us. And that is what I really want to focus on today: *how* to love one another, as Jesus has loved us. Looking back at Jesus' life in this Easter season, what can we learn from him about love? If we are to love him as he loved us, what does that mean? And I want to point out three specific ways that we can do this, that we can love in the same way that Jesus loved.

First, Jesus teaches us to love without expecting anything in return. When Jesus washes his disciples' feet, it is not in the hopes that they will return the favor. He washes their feet with the knowledge that they would soon abandon him, and that he will die alone on the cross. His love is unconditional, with no strings attached. He loves without agenda, other than demonstrating God's love for us, and showing us what that love looks like.

This is so different from how our world works. It's hard to even get our mind around. But one thing I have learned about loving in this way is that it is very freeing. In some ways, it is easier to love without keeping score. It's easier to love without hoping to get something in return. It's very freeing. But even if it was not easier to love in this way, it would still be necessary.

Because Jesus teaches us that this is what true love looks like. *"If you love those who love you, what reward do you have?" Jesus once asked. "Do not even the tax collectors do the same?"* (Matthew 5:46). Loving those who love us is what everyone does. Loving those who don't love us is what Christians do. And by this the world will know that we are Jesus' disciples, if we love unconditionally, without agenda, and without expecting a single thing in return.

I like what Brene Brown says about this kind of love:

"[Love is] waking every day and loving someone who may or may not love us back, whose safety we can't ensure, who may stay in our lives or may leave without a moment's notice, who may be loyal to the day they die or betray us tomorrow — that's vulnerability."

And *vulnerability* is the next thing that Jesus teaches us about love. The word “*vulnerable*” literally means “*able to be wounded*.” When we are vulnerable, we open ourselves up to the possibility of being wounded. And that is exactly what Jesus teaches us – that we should open ourselves up to one another in love, even if it opens us up to the possibility of being wounded. That’s what Jesus did, right? Jesus loved Judas, who betrayed him. He loved Peter, who denied knowing him.

He loved Thomas, who doubted him. He loved those who abandoned him, and even those who crucified him. Jesus loved in a way that opened him up to these wounds. And he teaches us to do the same.

Brene Brown goes on to say that:

“To love is to be vulnerable, to give someone your heart and say, ‘I know this could hurt so bad, but I’m willing to do it.’ And there is an increasing number of people in the world today that are not willing to take that risk. They’d rather never know love than to know hurt or grief, and that is a huge price to pay.” And the reason that this is such a huge price to pay, according to Brown, is simple: *“We are wired for love, and we’re hardwired for belonging. It’s in our DNA.”*

And how true that is. It is how God created us – to be in relationship with God and with one another. We were created for love and for belonging and for community. And when we reject these things, there is always suffering. Jesus came to restore our relationship with God, by suffering for us. And he came to show us how to love. And loving in the way he taught us makes us vulnerable. It opens our hearts. Which is risky. But open hearts are the only kind that can be filled with God’s love.

“Love one another,” Jesus said, “just as I have loved you.” Loving in this way is without agenda. It makes us vulnerable. And it also leads us to love people who are not like us. Jesus loved people who were not like him. He loved people who disagreed with him. He loved people who looked at the world very differently from him. There is no one that Jesus did not love. It is the one thing that he was incapable of. He could not help but love everyone.

It doesn’t mean that he didn’t challenge them, or get frustrated with them, or even occasionally rebuke them. I could give you examples of all of these from Jesus. It doesn’t mean that. It simply means that he loved them, no matter what, and teaches us to do the same.

The old commandment, from Leviticus, is to love our neighbor as our self. But the new commandment, from Jesus, is to love even those who are not our neighbors. Jesus loved lepers, for example, who were considered unclean and unloved by God. Jesus loved tax collectors, even calling one to be his disciple. Jesus loved Samaritans. He loved prostitutes. He loved the poor. He loved those that society didn’t even see. He considered them all our neighbors. All loved by God. And all deserving of our love. Jesus completely redefined who our neighbor is. Our neighbor is now anyone and everyone we have an opportunity to love.

But not only that, Jesus taught us to love even our enemies. Just as he did. Now, this does not mean that we accept or agree with what they are doing. Love according to Jesus doesn’t mean accepting actions that are wrong. Jesus met people where they were, but didn’t leave them there.

Sunday May 18th, 2025

He called them to repent. He loved them, and forgave them, but also invited them to change their ways. Jesus never loved sin. But he always loved sinners. He still does. And he shows us how to do the same.

Loving as Jesus loved is not easy. Jesus never said it would be. And looking back at his life, in the light of his death and resurrection, we can see that it was not easy for him either. It is never going to be easy to love unconditionally, without agenda or expectation. It is never going to be easy to love in a way that makes us vulnerable, that opens us up to being hurt. It is never going to be easy to love people who aren't like us.

Jesus didn't say it would be easy. But it is certainly possible, or he wouldn't have commanded it. And it is exactly what he did. He is not asking us to do something that he didn't do already and do perfectly. And demonstrating love as Jesus did and does is critical to vitality of our lives and our witness.

On March 11, 1991, eight-year-old Anthony Henderson upset the distinguished leader of our nation, President George Bush. President Bush was visiting Anthony's school and had sat down beside Anthony to read him a book. Suddenly during the reading Anthony Henderson queried, "Are you really the President?" Mr. Bush was quite surprised by the question and even more so as he saw the serious look on the lad's face.

President Bush responded, "Yeah, you mean you didn't know that?" "Did you think I was a pretend guy or something?" Mr. Bush then muttered, "how can I prove it to you?" Our president of the United States then proceeded to pull out identification from his wallet. "Let's see now, here is my driver's license; see it says B-U-S-H, Bush." "My name is George Herbert Walker Bush". Anthony didn't seem convinced.

President Bush then pulled out a series of identification items he thought would persuade the child of the truth. "Here is my American Express Card; here is a picture of my grandchild and here is one of my grandsons playing baseball". Finally, Mr. Bush said, "I guess that is all I have to show you unless you will accept that black limousine out there; or maybe I'll give you an autograph". "Oh no", replied Anthony. "The teacher said we can't take autographs".

There is a picture in the March issue of USA Today of Anthony Henderson sitting with a puzzled President examining his American Express Card. Don't leave home without it. But even that didn't help George Herbert Walker Bush with Anthony Henderson.

Listen church, it is getting harder and harder to get people to come to church. Do you know why? Its because the world is looking for proof that we are what we say we are. Just because we sit in the church house every Sunday will not convince the world you're a Christian anymore than a driver's license convinced Anthony Henderson of our President's identity. What is it going to take?

Jesus gave us that answer in **John 13:35**, "By this shall all men know that you are my disciples, if you love one to another".

Sunday May 18th, 2025

But here's the good news: When we fail – and we will – Jesus will still love us. When we doubt him, deny him, and even betray him, he will still love us. Because that is what true love looks like. It looks like Jesus. Kneeling at our feet. Loving us. And asking us to do the same.

“By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.”

So let us love one another, until all the world knows the love of Jesus.