

Alan Baughcum

Sermon: Just as I Have Loved You...
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Acts 11:1-18, John 13:31-35

On previous occasions I have talked about hitting speed bumps when we read the scriptures. Speed bumps are words or phrases or sentences that cause us to slow down if not come to a complete halt in our reading because they provoke us to stop and think more deeply about what we are reading. Well, today's reading in the Gospel according to John has one of those speed bumps. Jesus said, "I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another."

The odd word, the speed bump, is the word "new." What is "new" about the commandment to love one another? In Leviticus 19:18, we are told to "love your neighbor as yourself." That commandment is at the heart of Torah and is quoted and referenced on numerous occasions in the New Testament by Jesus and by Paul and James (Mt 5:43, Mt 19:19, 22:39, Mr 12:31, Lu 10:27, Ro 13:9, Ga 5:14, Jas 2:8).

What is new about the commandment to love our neighbor as Jesus gives it here is the phrase that follows, "Just as I have loved you, ..." "Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another." Just as Jesus has loved us, so also should we love one another. Or, in the words of Paul's letter to the Philippians 2:2-5: make my joy complete: be of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind. Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves. Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others. Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, What were the special characteristics of Jesus' love that changed the command to love one another sufficiently to make it "a new commandment?" First, Jesus' love for the disciples was inextricably tied to his love of God and to God's love for Jesus. Remember God's words at Jesus' baptism, "This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased (Mt 3:17)." Remember Jesus' words during his temptation in the wilderness, "...live... by every word that comes from the mouth of God...[and]... Worship the Lord your God and serve only him." Jesus loved God so much that he was obedient to God in every aspect of his life. Second, because Jesus so loved God, Jesus gave everything for those he loved, including the disciples, even to dying on the cross. Remember Jesus facing death on the cross and praying at the garden of Gethsemane, "Abba, Father, for you all things are possible; remove this cup from me; yet, not what I want, but what you want." The love that Jesus commands us to have for one another must be based, as was Jesus' love, on complete obedience to the will of God for our lives. Without that complete and trusting relationship to God's love, I believe that our own will and our own love will soon be exhausted, and we cannot sustain the commandment to love one another. Our love for one another must be continually refreshed and renewed by the living water of God's love.

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Third, Jesus loved the disciples as they were, but Jesus' love did not leave them as they were. Jesus' love transformed the disciples into faithful followers who were obedient to God's will and who, with one exception, faithfully engaged in ministries assigned them by Jesus. And those ministries took the disciples to places and put them in situations that they would never have dreamed of before they met Jesus. Obedience to God and to ministry in Jesus' name stretched the disciples to their limits, and beyond.

Consider the disciple Peter. The Gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke say that he was a fisherman on the Sea of Galilee when Jesus called him to be a disciple (Mark 1:16, Mt 4:18, Luke 5:1-12). Mark and Luke also indicate that he had a home in Capernaum on the shores of the Sea of Galilee (Mark 1:21-34, Luke 4:31-39). If so, then Peter was living and working in the sticks, about 100 miles distant from Jerusalem. Without the call from Jesus, perhaps he would never have gone to Jerusalem. It is almost certain that he would have never made it as far as the city of Rome where, as church tradition has it, he was crucified. Following Jesus took Peter to places he would never have seen.

Following Jesus also required that Peter change his religious views. Peter and other Jewish believers were raised in a tradition which believed that they, among all the nations, were singled out for a covenantal relationship with God. As the church lady on the old Saturday Night Live shows used to say, "Well, isn't that special?"

Well, yes it was special. But the Jewish people fell into the trap, so easy to do, of believing that they were somehow special because of this relationship, because God had singled them out to love. The truth of the matter was that God singled them out to love and to be with in covenantal relationship because that was the way that God wanted to reach out to all the nations, through the people of Israel, through the Jews. The special relationship with God was special not because the Jewish people were special but because it was the way God could hold the Jewish people responsible for world evangelism.

Well, Peter believed that the Jews were special too. Jews were clean by obedience to the 613 commandments of the Law, or they could be made clean by worship and sacrifice in the Temple. Gentiles, non-Jews, were unclean. Certain animals on the land and certain creatures in the sea were unclean -- and Jews were supposed to stay away from all that was unclean. So, it came as quite a shock to Peter when he had a vision in which he saw all of God's creation and heard God say to him that God had made everything clean, and that Peter should not regard God's creation as unclean. Nor should Peter refrain from any part of God's creation. Following this vision, Peter was summoned to the home of the unclean Gentile and Roman citizen and centurion Cornelius, where other unclean Gentiles had also gathered. They asked Peter to preach to them, and he did. The Holy Spirit came to this group of Gentiles, as it had come to Jewish believers at Pentecost, and Peter baptized the whole group.

The scripture reading from Acts tells us the story of Peter defending himself to his fellow Jewish believers in Jerusalem. After hearing the story from Peter and the six Jewish witnesses who had accompanied him, these followers of Jesus concluded that "God has given even to the Gentiles

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the repentance that leads to life.” (I love that word “even.” It is a sign of how hard it is to give up our prejudices.)

And of course, all these developments prepared the followers of Jesus for the great mission of evangelizing to the Gentiles. But that great mission would not have happened if the love of God through Jesus had not prepared Peter for transformation and then transformed him from one who was narrowly sectarian and Jewish to one who was open to including “even” Gentiles in the joyful community of God.

Not too long ago I had occasion to revisit the church of my childhood. It is still a fundamentalist Baptist church, where the fires of hell and the glories of heaven are preached from the pulpit and sung in the pews. At the end of the service, I was in conversation with a church member, a former high school classmate of mine, about how our nearby hometown of Clarkston had changed. I told him that I was happy to see that the town, formerly nearly all-white, was now being heavily populated by folks of many ethnicities, including Africans and Asians and Latin Americans. No longer limited to Baptists and Methodists, the town was now home to many religious traditions, including Buddhists. His bitter reply, and I quote, “They ought to drop an atomic bomb on the whole place!” I do not believe that my friend exhibited the transforming love of Jesus as communicated by the Holy Spirit when he wished nuclear destruction on our hometown.

I do believe that Peter exhibited the transforming love of God when he journeyed to Cornelius’ house and preached the good news of Jesus Christ to the gathered Gentiles. Not only was Cornelius and his house saved, if you will, so was Peter and his companions. So also were the folks in Jerusalem who looked askance at Peter’s eating with the unclean Gentiles.

It is worthwhile thinking about this story more deeply. People in our time are deeply divided by ideology, religion, ethnicity ... is it possible that this story can give us some clues about how to heal those divisions even as the division between Peter and the Jewish believers in Jerusalem was healed?

Healing was helped because Peter and those Jewish believers had some things in common. They were followers of Jesus of Nazareth, who had done many controversial things. He had eaten with sinners. He had taken a tax collector for the Romans as one of his disciples. He had fed the multitudes with only enough food for a family picnic. He controlled the wind and the waves of the Sea of Galilee. He had driven the moneychangers out of the Temple. He had raised Lazarus from the dead. And Jesus had been raised from the dead to eternal life in heaven with the Father. He was the Father’s Son, the very Son of God.

Peter and the Jewish believers in Jerusalem had, in a sense, been prepared for the unusual. They had been prepared for having their viewpoints changed because Jesus had been such a disrupter. The Jewish believers also knew about the Holy Spirit, from their experience at Pentecost. They could understand that the Holy Spirit could bring with it disruption and change. Prior to the arrival of the Holy Spirit, they were content to live their daily lives, fulfilling the requirements of

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Jewish worship and behavior. After the Holy Spirit, they were filled with the need for more. They were motivated to proclaim the good news of Jesus Christ throughout the world. Peter and the Jewish believers in Jerusalem had a lot in common. And the things that they had in common made it possible for them to talk about the very strange vision that Peter had. It became possible for the Jewish believers to listen to Peter and not dismiss him. They were willing to hear Peter's story. The things they held in common made it possible for them to accept what Peter shared and conclude that, good grief, it was possible for unclean Gentiles to join them in their journey and in their proclamation of the good news.

In our divisions with our neighbors in 2025, we need to look for commonalities, things we share in addition to the things that divide us. We need to distinguish between the things that are important instead of superficialities. Consider this story from a Boston, MA newspaper from several years ago.

It was on the Op-Ed page, written by a young boy, now a 7th-grader in a Boston middle school, but a 5th-grader at the time of the story he wrote. His name is Tsega Birkneh. In his story he told how a young girl in his class became unpopular with a friend of his because the girl had the highest math test score in the class. The friend planned to hit the young girl with a milk container and get milk all over her so that the rest of the class would laugh at the girl. Tsega knew this was wrong and decided he had been friends with this boy only to be one of the "cool" kids.

Tsega began to follow the young girl, Kalsang, to protect her. When his friend finally found an opportunity, Tsega was ready and jumped in front of the flying milk carton and took the hit. And he took the laughter of the other kids. And he lost his friend.

Tsega wrote, "Because of this incident, I learned how to make real friends — the type who know what is good. These are the real cool kids. I was also happy because some of the good kids got to know the real me, the one who is nice and kind, not the one who does things that are crazy just to be cool."

It ought to be easier to heal the divisions between Christians and Jews and between Christians and Christians because we share so much in common. Often however those divisions are especially resistant to healing because we have hardened ourselves into positions that we tell ourselves Jesus or the Father himself wants us to hold.

And of course we must make special efforts to heal divisions with people who have very different religious and political and cultural values. We must seek out common values. Surely one of those values is love.

Our scripture from the gospel according to John tells us that the way to approach others is by the love we share as Jesus' disciple. It is that love that will be the distinguishing characteristic by which people recognize us as Jesus' disciples or not. Verse 35: "By this everyone will know that

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you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.” The community will recognize us as Christians, as disciples of Jesus, if they see us loving one another.

That makes sense. People do recognize one another by how they see us. And how people see us is a function of how we look and how we behave and how we love.

For example, Mrs. Smith, a third grade schoolteacher, saw one of her students making faces at another child on the playground at recess. She took the young boy aside and said, “Bobby, when I was child, I was told that if I made ugly faces, my face would freeze and I would stay like that.” To which Bobby replied, “Well, you can’t say you weren’t warned.”

How do we avoid displaying the ugly face of disdain and judgment and condemnation? Remember Jesus, who wandered the highways and byways of Galilee making himself known by his teachings of love and welcome and hospitality. Remember Jesus who was eager to learn about the people he met, without judgment. Jesus asked the future disciple, Andrew, when they first met, “What are you looking for?” (John 1:35-44) Remember the long conversations Jesus had with Nicodemus about being born again from the Spirit, with the Samaritan woman about living water and eternal life, the conversations with those he healed ... so many conversations.

We need to overcome our prejudices and set aside our judgments of others if we want to meet with them and understand them. We do not have to give up our values, but we do need to look for common ground so that we can build trust and heal what divides us. We do not have to agree with everyone, but we do need to understand and love, even as Christ has loved us.

Amen.