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"I COMMAND YOU TO LOVE ONE ANOTHER"
JOHN 13:31-35

Let us pray: O God, light of the minds that know you, life of the souls that love you, bless the words of my lips and the meditations of our hearts breathe into us. We ask it in Jesus' name. Amen

The Gospel for today asks for us to be able to know Jesus as the way, the truth, and the life that we may follow in the way that leads to eternal life. And according to Jesus, the only way to follow him is to love one another as he loves us.

Once there was a church that had the phrase "I am the way, the truth and the life" on a sign above its iron gate. The church and its message intrigued a young man, so he decided to go there on Sunday. He was not welcomed. No one spoke to him, or smiled, or offered him a handshake. After the service he left in a puzzled state.

This was something obviously lost on the folks in the small church that the young man visited. They were uneasy with somebody they didn't know, so they kept their distance. Have you ever thought about what is going on in the world today compared to the experience of the disciple Simon Peter?

Have you ever wondered why many are afraid of immigrants, legal or not? Do you understand that Sunday morning can be the most exclusive, segregated, and separate time of the week?

Perhaps during the week, you may work, bump against, commute with, and eat with people who are not like you, but often on Sunday we attend a church that consists mostly of people like ourselves. There are exceptions, of course.

But many of our churches do not look anything like the communities that we live in, the grocery stores we shop in, or the movie theaters we attend. Why is that? Do you ever wonder? In Revelation 21:1-6, John offers a passage often read at burials.

The image of death having been vanquished, of mourning and crying being no more, and of God wiping away every tear is a powerful image, followed by the declaration that God is making all things new. One of those new things is surely the way we experience one another, as diverse gifts of the God who made us all.

If we begin to think about people who differ from us in race or culture, then we can see them as gifts to us from God, that gives us a wholly different point of view toward the many people sent to us by God. We can turn away from them, but aren't we then also turning away from God?

When we hear the gospel reading, Jesus calls us to love one another, "Just as I have loved you." This is not a phrase easily dismissed. Jesus' entire ministry, including his passion and resurrection, hangs on this phrase. It isn't odd that Jesus would tell his followers to love one another.

What's strange is that he told them this was his commandment. That's a pretty strong word, "commandment." It carries an imperative with it, leaving no room whatsoever for debate. "You will do this," not unlike what a parent says to a child who needs to take his medicine.

And that may be the way Jesus' disciples took it, as if it were a bad tasting medication. Jesus doesn't say they have to like one another. Which is good because, as we all know, some people are simply more likeable than others.

It's true even here in this church that you may not like everybody, it's that way in your family and mine, and it was certainly so in the ranks of Jesus' disciples. Yes, it's a good thing Jesus didn't tell us we have to like one another, or we might be in real trouble.

John who wrote our fourth gospel was hardly fond of Judas Iscariot. He called Judas a liar and a thief and leaves little doubt with his readers that he didn't care one bit for the betrayer. John may not have gotten along with some of the others as well.

And there's enough evidence from other stories about their adventures with Jesus to leave us with the idea that the disciples had their share of squabbles.

If the John who wrote this gospel is the brother of James, the son of Zebedee, then we know that he and his brother attempted to gain the right and left seats of honor next to Jesus when he was to come into his glory in the kingdom of heaven. It seemed like such a good idea at the time, a very shrewd power move, in fact.

But not only did they completely misunderstand the nature of the kingdom Jesus had come to introduce to them, it was totally uncharacteristic of the way Jesus wanted his followers to relate to one another. Yes, it's a good thing that Jesus did not command his disciples to like one another.

What he did was require them to love each other. 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."

But what's so new about that? What is this "new" commandment Jesus talks about? In a Peanuts strip, Lucy says to Charlie Brown, "You know what I don't understand?

I don't understand love!" Charlie Brown says, "Who does?" Lucy replies, "Explain love to me, Charlie Brown." He says, "You can't explain love. I can recommend a book or a poem or a painting, but I can't explain love." She says, "Well, try, Charlie Brown, try." So, Charlie says, "Well, let's say I see this beautiful, cute little girl walk by."

Lucy interrupts—"Why does she have to be cute? Huh? Why can't someone fall in love with someone with freckles and a big nose? Explain that!" Charlie says, "Well, maybe you are right. Let's just say I see this girl walk by with this great big nose.... "

Lucy shouts, "I didn't say GREAT BIG NOSE." Hanging his head, which he often did when he dealt with Lucy, Charlie says, "Not only can you not explain love—you can't even talk about it."

But Jesus not only talked about love, he commanded us to love one another, "Just as I have loved you." Then, he goes out and shows them and us what kind of love he means by sacrificing his life on a cross.

A little boy wanted to meet God. Not knowing where God lived, the boy packed his suitcase with Twinkies and a six-pack of root beer and started out on his journey. When he had gone a few blocks, he met an old woman who was sitting in the park staring at some pigeons.

The boy sat down next to her and opened his suitcase. He was about to take a drink from his root beer when he noticed that the old lady looked hungry, so he offered her a Twinkie. She accepted it and smiled at him.

Her smile was so pretty that the boy wanted to see it again, so he offered her a root beer. Once again, she smiled at him. The boy was delighted! Together they sat all afternoon eating and smiling.

As it grew dark, the boy realized it was time to go home, but before he had gone more than a few steps, he turned around and ran back to the old woman and gave her a hug. She gave him her biggest smile ever.

When the boy opened the door to his own house a short time later, his mother was surprised by the look of joy on his face. She asked him, "What did you do today that made you so happy?"

He replied, "I had lunch with God. "But before his mother could respond, he added, "And You know what? She's got the most beautiful smile I've ever seen!"

Meanwhile, the old woman, also radiant with joy, returned to her home. Her son was stunned by the look of peace on her face and he asked, "Mother, what did you do today that made you so happy?"

She replied, "I had Twinkies and root beer with God, and you know, he's much younger than I expected."

Today God would be in the supermarket talking with the checkers, the stockers, and the customers finding their way through a bewildering array of products. He is there because that is where all the community goes to buy food.

He is there because that may be where a lonely newcomer to town gets a smile at the cash register, or may even be asked, "Are you new here? Welcome." In John 13:31-35, Jesus is teaching his disciples about humility, acceptance and love. But what about church?

What about that Sunday morning experience that is often the place where we see only familiar faces, only people like us, only people we know? Is Jesus there? Of course, he is, but he is there to welcome the stranger whoever walks in that door timidly and tentatively looking for new a community.

Are we ready for that? Do we seek those persons? Would they be welcomed, truly welcomed here? That's why we have greeters or ushers. To welcome not just newcomers but for all of God's children.

Earlier in my sermon I spoke about the young man who had visited the church and was made to feel like an outsider, well he went back to that neighborhood and he walked by the church he had visited on that Sunday. It had been many years.

The sign "I am the way, the truth, and the life" still stood above the iron gate. Then he saw that the church doors were boarded over, as were many of the windows. The church was obviously closed and looked as though it had been for some time. He walked on, wondering what had happened.

We can draw our own conclusions, but if that church had welcomed him and others instead of being closed to what God was sending them on frequent occasions, the end of their story might have been very different indeed.

So, the next time you wonder if you have it in you to love as Jesus loved, consider what he did for you. It is not asking too much that we respond to this by loving one another. Don't you think? Amen.

Let us pray: Lord, may we love as Jesus loves us. It is as simple as that... and as hard. But let us be faithful in trying to do it. Jesus loved people in a radical way, and we must find it in our hearts to be like Jesus. Amen.