

Sermons at
First Lutheran Church (ELCA)
Reggie Denton, Pastor

May 15, 2022 (5th Sunday of Easter)
John 13:31-35

A teenager came home from choir practice EARLY one evening. His Dad asked, "What brings you back so soon?"

"We had to call off choir practice this week," the young man replied. "The organist and the choir director got into a heated argument about HOW to sing, 'Let there be Peace on Earth,' so we quit for tonight."

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." Hmmm.

It turns out...love is HARD. Not just TALKING about love, but DOING love, is REALLY HARD.

This is the TRUTH. NOT how our CULTURE TREATS love. Rather than the TRUTH about love, our culture makes love sentimental. Commercial. HYPOTHETICAL. CHEAPENED like a Hallmark greeting card. But, at the end of the day, we are better off with the TRUTH, than living in a world that PRETENDS that love is EASY.

It ISN'T easy. And it NEVER HAS been. And it never WILL be.

"I give you a new commandment," Jesus said, but what is NEW about a command to "love one another"? That command is ALL OVER the Old Testament, and can be found in every major religion in the world. So what's NEW about it? What's NEW is that Jesus commands us to love "just as I have loved YOU."

And what's BEAUTIFUL is that Jesus SHOWS us HOW HIS love is DIFFERENT, by what he's DOING AS he says it.

Did you notice the reference to JUDAS at the BEGINNING of our text, BEFORE Jesus gives us this "Love Commandment"? This teaching on love happened at the LAST SUPPER.

Just BEFORE Jesus spoke these words, was the BETRAYAL of Judas.

And IMMEDIATELY AFTER is the prediction of PETER'S DENIAL.

I sometimes wonder what Jesus was THINKING when he spoke these words of love in between, AFTER "it was night" and BEFORE "the cock will crow."

And yet, Jesus WASHES the FEET of BOTH men, of both his BETRAYER and his DENIER. He washed their FEET! In SPITE of what they will do, Jesus LOVES them both. And FEEDS them BOTH.

And then he tells US to do the SAME. Because love, REAL LOVE, is NEVER EASY.

JESUS, as God's Son, KNEW how DIFFICULT love can be.

From the death of his dear friend, Lazarus, to the self-serving ambition of James and John, to the hypocrisy of Peter, the abandonment of Judas, and the vicious SELF-righteousness of Saul, before he became Paul, and EVERY generation of disciples since, oh yes, JESUS KNOWS how DIFFICULT love can be.

If we ISOLATE Jesus' love commandment from REAL LIFE, then we TURN the Christian faith into love without TRUTH – love without JESUS.

HUMAN love merely skims the SURFACE of GOSPEL love, of GOD'S love. HUMAN love is satisfied with the love of the WORLD, a love that demands and decrees, a love that stipulates and insists on certain STANDARDS, a love that LIMITS itself to a SELF-MAINTAINING love, a self-PRESERVING love, a SELF-love. A love UNWILLING to take RISKS. A SCARED love. A SAFE love.

C.S. Lewis wrote about it like this:

To love at all is to be VULNERABLE. Love ANYTHING, and your heart will certainly be WRUNG and possibly be BROKEN. If you want to make sure of keeping it intact, you must

give your heart to NO one, not even to an ANIMAL. Wrap it carefully round with hobbies and little luxuries; avoid ALL entanglements; lock it up safe in the CASKET or COFFIN of your selfishness. But IN that casket – safe, dark, motionless, airless – it will CHANGE. It will NOT be broken; it will become UNBREAKABLE, impenetrable, IRREDEEMABLE...The ONLY place outside Heaven where you can be perfectly SAFE from all the DANGERS of love ... is HELL.

You see, REAL love is never WITHOUT RISK. Love is NEVER without SACRIFICE. Love is never without a HURTING HEART. REAL love KNOWS what's on the other SIDE of its most FULFILLING, most WONDERFUL moments.

And that's actually what we LIKE about love, as HARD as it is. Even though there are days our hearts break, TRUE love is REAL love. FELT love.

True love IMAGINES the future. True love KNOWS CHANGE. True love expects and ACCEPTS that NOTHING can stay the SAME.

It's no ACCIDENT that this commandment from Jesus occurs in what is called his "FAREWELL Discourse." Things are about to CHANGE – and BIG time. Jesus will hand himself over to be arrested. Jesus will be put on trial and crucified. Jesus will LEAVE his disciples. And WHILE his leaving is to prepare a PLACE for them (John 14:2), he IS LEAVING – and TRANSITIONS are EXCRUCIATING.

This "love commandment" is said in the MIDST of betrayal and denial, in the midst of departure and desperation, in the midst of worry and fear. It turns out, this is the NATURE of CHRIST-LIKE love.

It's a love AWARE of the consequences. It's a love aware of CHALLENGES. But MOST of all, it's a love ... that LOVES ANYWAY. A love that KNOWS what it's getting itself INTO, and yet, LOVES ABUNDANTLY. Our cup overflows.

"I give you a new commandment," Jesus said, "that you love one another. Just as I have loved YOU, you ALSO should love one ANOTHER."

May it be so with you. Amen.