

First Presbyterian Church of Kissimmee, Florida
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John 13:31-35 (NRSV)

When he had gone out, Jesus said, "Now the Son of Man has been glorified, and God has been glorified in him. [32] If God has been glorified in him, God will also glorify him in himself and will glorify him at once. [33] Little children, I am with you only a little longer. You will look for me; and as I said to the Jews so now I say to you, 'Where I am going, you cannot come.' [34] I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. [35] By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another."

Acts 11:1-18 (NRSV)

Now the apostles and the believers who were in Judea heard that the Gentiles had also accepted the word of God. [2] So when Peter went up to Jerusalem, the circumcised believers criticized him, [3] saying, "Why did you go to uncircumcised men and eat with them?" [4] Then Peter began to explain it to them, step by step, saying, [5] "I was in the city of Joppa praying, and in a trance I saw a vision. There was something like a large sheet coming down from heaven, being lowered by its four corners; and it came close to me. [6] As I looked at it closely I saw four-footed animals, beasts of prey, reptiles, and birds of the air. [7] I also heard a voice saying to me, 'Get up, Peter; kill and eat.' [8] But I replied, 'By no means, Lord; for nothing profane or unclean has ever entered my mouth.' [9] But a second time the voice answered from heaven, 'What God has made clean, you must not call profane.' [10] This happened three times; then everything was pulled up again to heaven. [11] At that very moment three men, sent to me from Caesarea, arrived at the house where we were. [12] The Spirit told me to go with them and not to make a distinction between them and us. These six brothers also accompanied me, and we entered the man's house. [13] He told us how he had seen the angel standing in his house and saying, 'Send to Joppa and bring Simon, who is called Peter; [14] he will give you a message by which you and your entire household will be saved.' [15] And as I began to speak, the Holy Spirit fell upon them just as it had upon us at the beginning. [16] And I remembered the word of the Lord, how he had said, 'John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit.' [17] If then God gave them the same gift that

he gave us when we believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I that I could hinder God?" [18] When they heard this, they were silenced. And they praised God, saying, "Then God has given even to the Gentiles the repentance that leads to life."

Revelation 21:1-6 (NRSV)

Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. [2] And I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. [3] And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying,

"See, the home of God is among mortals.

He will dwell with them;

they will be his peoples,

and God himself will be with them;

[4] he will wipe every tear from their eyes.

Death will be no more;

mourning and crying and pain will be no more,

for the first things have passed away."

[5] And the one who was seated on the throne said, "See, I am making all things new." Also he said, "Write this, for these words are trustworthy and true." [6] Then he said to me, "It is done! I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end. To the thirsty I will give water as a gift from the spring of the water of life.

MISSION STUDIES

When ministers are ordained in the Presbyterian Church they take a vow to serve in the “governing bodies of the church.” In other words, we promise to help other churches grow and develop through our service to the church.

That’s why we say that we are a connectional church. We, all of us, are the body of Christ, and we have a greater responsibility than just our own local congregation.

In order to fulfill that vow I now serve on Presbytery’s Committee on Ministry, and one my assignments was to help several local churches do a mission study in preparation for calling a new minister. One of the questions we asked of participants in this study was: What do you like most about your church?

The two churches I visited were quite different in size and mission. One church had 80 members and was in a rural area. The other church had over 700 members and is the fastest growing church in our Presbytery.

But, participants in both groups said that they came to that particular church for the same reason. They felt welcome and accepted. It was not just a place to sing hymns and listen to a sermon. It was like a second family, a family of faith.

I suspect that’s why you see “visitors welcome” on church signs all over the country. We instinctively know that this is the most important thing. If those who visit us do not feel welcome, they will soon leave. More than that, our Scripture lessons for today seem to suggest that if we are not a welcoming and compassionate people, we have not been faithful disciples of Jesus. We have been poor witnesses to the power of God’s salvation.

A MISSION OF LOVE

In the gospel of John there is a long section (from which our lesson for today is drawn) called Jesus’ farewell discourse. Some commentators refer to it as Jesus’ last will and testament to the church.

Jesus told his disciples that he would only be with them a little longer. Soon he would be killed by people he very people he loved and came to save.

But, this would not mean defeat. It would be the means of glory. Resurrection would change everything, and that resurrection power would be seen in the quality of the new community formed by Easter.

Jesus was not going to leave his disciples alone after his resurrection and ascension into heaven. His Spirit would enable them to carry on his ministry. And that ministry could be summarized in one word, “love.”

Jesus gave his disciples a “new” commandment. They were to “love one another as he had loved them.” And this love would constitute the message and mission of the church. They would be a community marked by their love for one another.

We used to sing about that at church camp. “They will know we are Christians by our love, by our love. They will know we are Christians by our love.”

That used to sound so nice by the campfire. But, soon we had to leave that mountain retreat and go back to harsh reality. Some of those Christians that we were supposed to love wore hobnailed boots!

If the world was to know that we were Christians by our love, we were guilty of sending mixed messages at best. How can we love when the people we are called to love often reject and even harm us?

Love is a much used and abused word these days. Love can mean almost anything. We might get a warm, fuzzy feeling when we mention the word, love, but when we try to define love, fuzzy is all we get.

In order to clear up our fuzzy picture of love, we need to look at Jesus. Jesus said that his disciples should love one another *as He had first loved them*.

That’s the key. Love must be defined by the life of Jesus.

How would you define the love of God as revealed in Jesus? I would define the love of Jesus in three words. His love is unconditional, sacrificial and compassionate.

UNCONDITIONAL LOVE

First, God's love as revealed in Jesus Christ is unconditional. God's love as revealed in Jesus Christ is for everyone.

In John 3:16 we learn that God sent his Son, Jesus into the world because he loved the world. Notice that this verse says that God loved the world, the whole world. It doesn't say that God restricted his love to those who spoke a certain language, followed certain customs or participated in a particular religious ritual.

God loved the world. God loved his whole creation, and so he sent his Son, Jesus into the world so that the world might be saved.

Jesus' disciples had a hard time wrapping their mind around a love that big and inclusive.

They were Jews, and even after the resurrection of Jesus and the coming of the Spirit to empower their ministry, they just assumed that in order to be saved a person would have to first become a Jew.

And we have a hard time wrapping our mind around a love that big and inclusive as well. Our love often stops at the border.

We are afraid to love without strings attached; we are afraid to give ourselves to someone who is different from us in some significant way.

OVERCOMING DIVISIONS

God might love the world, but our love is not so inclusive. We always want to put labels on people. We divide our country into red states and blue states, conservative and liberal. We live in a land where many are afraid of those who are different in any way. People are divided by politics, religion, immigration and dozens of other issues.

And that's what makes our lesson from Acts so apropos. It was exactly the same in Jerusalem when Peter preached the first sermons of the Christian Church. People were divided according to politics, religion and immigration. Who was accepted and who was rejected depended upon these things.

In our passage from the book of Acts we learn that in the beginning the apostle Peter was *not* so inclusive in the way he thought this way about the Christian faith. He thought that salvation was only for God's chosen people. Salvation certainly wasn't for the Gentiles. The Gentiles weren't kosher, to even associate with them meant that a person was ritually unclean.

But, then to the shock and amazement of everyone Peter changed. He began eating with Gentiles. The leaders in Jerusalem heard about it and asked Peter, "Why did you do this? Why did you have a meal with uncircumcised men? Have you lost your senses?"

A HEAVENLY VISION

Peter said that he didn't have much choice in the matter. His association with non-Jews was inspired by a heavenly vision.

Three different times he had the same vision. Non-kosher animals came floating down on what looked like a sheet. A voice told Peter, "Get up, kill and eat." Peter refused. He knew better than to eat something that was not kosher. His mamma had raised him better than that.

But, Peter's refusal was countered each time with a rebuke from heaven. The voice said, "If God says its okay, its okay."

And then the point of this vision was made plain. Three strangers, Gentiles appear at Peter's door. And the Spirit tells Peter to go with them, no questions asked.

Peter and six of his friends oblige, and when they get to the home of another Gentile, the one who sent for them, they learn that he's had a vision too. An angel told this man to send for Peter because he had a message that would save their lives.

Peter began to speak, but before he could say more than a few sentences, the Holy Spirit fell upon those Gentiles and filled them just as it had happened to Peter and the other disciples at Pentecost. Peter recognized what was happening from experience and some words of Jesus came to mind, “John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit.”

Peter concluded, “If God wanted to save this people, who was I to stop God?” Those who had protested Peter’s behavior were silent for a long time, and then they said in amazement, “God has even decided to save the Gentiles, praise God.”

Everyone is within the scope of God’s grace. God’s love as revealed in Jesus Christ is for everyone, and if we are to love as he loved, then our love must be for everyone. There are no strings attached when it comes to God’s love. It is unconditional love.

I like the way Martin Luther King put it. He said that the story of the church is like a great extended family that receives a tremendous bequest: they receive an inheritance of a wonderful, beautiful, spacious, luxurious home to share. There is only one stipulation. All must live in it together.

Most of us are not Jews, but we too have our lists of people who are acceptable and people who are unacceptable, those that are pure and those that are profane. We may even consider ourselves to be unacceptable, beyond the pale of God’s salvation. This story teaches us that there is no one beyond God’s touch.

SACRIFICIAL LOVE

Second God’s love as revealed in Jesus is a sacrificial love.

Not only are we called to love those who are different from us, we are also called to love those who are actually hostile toward us. Jesus loved not only his friends and disciples but also his enemies.

As he was being crucified, Jesus asked that his tormenters be forgiven for their cruel and senseless act. After all, they didn't know what they were doing.

Our lesson from the gospel of John takes place right after Judas leaves to betray Jesus, and at this time Jesus says, "Now the Son of man has been glorified."

The hour of Jesus' glory is the hour of his betrayal. Love is seen most clearly in the sacrifice of God's Son on the cross.

Love in our society is often defined in more selfish ways. We say something like, "If you love me, you'll do it."

C.S. Lewis referred to this kind of "love" as "need love". Need love is born of emptiness. It is a love that seeks to possess and control.

So many times when we say, "I love you" what we are really saying is: "I need you. I want you. You have a value that I want to make my own, no matter what the cost to you."

That's nonsense. Love, as Paul put it in his letter to the Corinthians, does not insist on its own way. And that should be especially true in the church that is founded on the love and forgiveness of the cross.

How many church squabbles have escalated into full blown conflict because people insisted on having their own way? Almost all of them occur in this way, and they present a poor witness to the love of God as revealed in Jesus.

If we are to love as Christ loved, we must learn to give up our rights. We must learn to practice a radical openness to God and to the other person. Genuine love means losing ourselves in another's arms, in another's laughter and in another's tears. It is one of the great ironies of life that we can only find ourselves when we lose ourselves completely.

The love of Jesus is our example. He lost his life on the cross. He was murdered by people he loved. But, murder did not have the last word. Love did.

The message of Easter is that he is risen. And now His love lives on in us. We are the vehicle by which the world can see true love. The Bible tells us that we are the body of Christ, and His Spirit enlivens and enables us to be who we are called to be.

Today when you take the bread that symbolizes body broken and the juice that symbolizes blood shed, remember the high cost of love. Loving as he loved means embracing a love that is sacrificial.

COMPASSIONATE LOVE

So, God's love as revealed in Jesus is unconditional and sacrificial. And there's one more word that I would use to describe the love of God as revealed in Jesus Christ. God's love is compassionate. The compassionate God is seen in John's revelation of a new heaven and a new earth.

In the vision, John is given a glimpse of a world in which God is with his people in a new way. There is no more death. There is no more suffering or pain. And God himself wipes away every tear.

In the ministry of Jesus we see a foreshadowing of this great day. Jesus' ministry was characterized by compassion. He spent his days healing the sick of physical and mental illnesses.

He touched those that society was afraid to touch. He touched the lepers. He touched those who grieved. He touched those who had lost faith in themselves and in others.

The time when there is no more death or suffering or pain is a future time. This passage is about that grand and glorious future. But, it is also a vision that guides what we do today. If we believe that one day death will be conquered and diseases will be healed and every tear will be wiped away by God himself, then that will affect how we live today.

We too will dare to touch the untouchables, to mourn with those who mourn and wipe away tears. We will find the strength to be lovingly compassionate toward others because we have hope for tomorrow. We believe in a day when God will wipe away every tear.

One of the difficult things about doing ministry in the name of Jesus is that sometimes the news is all bad. We want to wrap our arms around those who hurt, but there are just so many who hurt. Where do we begin? How can we dare to show the love and compassion of Christ to a world that hurts so much? We could easily be overwhelmed by the need.

The needs of the world are too great for us to bear. Compassion can extract too high a price. We can easily be burned out in our attempt to care for others.

But, we show compassion toward others *not* because we think that we can save the world or cure the world. We show compassion toward others because we, like John, have received a vision. It is a vision of a love that is eternal.

We have a vision of a day when death will be defeated. We have a vision of a day when there will be no more suffering or pain, and God himself will wipe away every tear.

As a pastor this passage is very precious to me. It gives me hope and strength for the living of these days. It makes me love in ways that I could not on my own. It points me beyond myself to a love that comes from above and beyond.

This past week I sent an e mail to some of you and challenged you to come up with a mission statement for our church based upon these three passages of Scripture. Let me share with you what I came up with,

Our church is called to love others with the unconditional, sacrificial and compassionate love of Christ.

That's job one. Everything else is window dressing.
May God enable us to embrace that vision and that calling, and may they know that we are Christians by our love.

Amen.