

LOVE is at the center of Jesus' teaching... LOVE is to be the center of our lives of faith!

“You shall LOVE the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, with all your mind, and with all your strength... you shall LOVE your neighbor as yourself.” – that's what Jesus teaches in Matthew, Mark and Luke.

“LOVE your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse / persecute you...” – that's what he teaches in Matthew and Luke

“I give you a new commandment, that you LOVE one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should LOVE one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have LOVE for one another.” – that's what he teaches us here, in John...

The setting of this “new (and final) commandment” that Jesus gives to his disciples (and to us!) is important! It is the night of the Last Supper. It is the night in which Jesus is betrayed. Do you remember how things played out that night?!

During this “last supper” with his friends, Jesus got up from the table... took off his outer robe and tied a towel around his waist. Then he poured water into a basin... and he began to—one by one—wash his disciples' feet and wipe them dry. *“Do you understand what I have done for you?”* he asked them afterward.

It was one of Jesus' most powerful “teachings”—playing out before our eyes!

We know that foot washing was a way of welcoming one's guests—a gesture of hospitality. BUT we also know that it was normally done by the guests themselves... or by the lowliest servant at the command of the host / master. This was NOT a task for Jesus, the host... the master... certainly NOT the task of the Messiah, the Holy One of God.

Why would their teacher... their Lord... the Christ... take the role of servant... and stoop down to wash their feet? And yet, that's exactly what he did.

With a basin of water and a towel, our servant Savior was teaching / showing his disciples (and us!!) what *agape* LOVE is. He was showing them, in a tangible way, *how much* he LOVED them! And he was teaching them *how* to LOVE one another... with an unconditional / wide-reaching / self-sacrificing / inclusive LOVE (that's what *agape* love is!)

- Jesus washed the feet of Judas, who would soon betray him...
- He washed the feet of Peter, who, in a matter of hours, would deny him...
- He washed the feet of each of his beloved 12 (his closest friends)—even though he knew, by the end of the day, they would all fall away / fail to stand by him in his hour of greatest distress...

The LOVE that Jesus demonstrated here was clearly NOT based on the merit of the 12...

It was shortly after this that Judas departed. And that's where our reading for today begins: *“When he [Judas] had gone out...”*

Jesus knows very well what Judas' “going out” means; but he also knows that the rest of his disciples do NOT understand the implications of Judas' departure—that he is going to betray Jesus... or what will happen this very night.

Jesus knows that he will soon be leaving his disciples behind. He has only been with them a short time... the disciples have learned so little... understood so little... grasped so little of what their teacher / Lord has been doing in their midst. How will they cope without him?

Jesus knows that this will be his last chance to say what he wants (needs) to say to his beloved disciples. So, instead of addressing them as disciples, he addresses them with an intimacy that conveys the poignancy of this moment: “*Little children,*” he says to these grown men, “*listen to me now. I am getting ready to go to a place where you cannot come, so it’s important that we have this time together now...*”

**I know at least some of us have experienced something like this—a final, intensive conversation with someone we love who knew that he/she was not going to be with us much longer. It is truly a sacred time—a time to remember for the rest of our life! And what is said, in that moment... is sacred, too—to be held tightly / honored.

This is the way we are meant to remember these important words of Jesus: “*I give you a new commandment,*” he says so simply, “*that you LOVE one another...*”

“*Just as I have loved you, you also should LOVE one another,*” Jesus continues. “*By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have LOVE for one another.*”

He describes it as a “new commandment.” We know, of course, that the command to LOVE one another is not new. So why does Jesus call it a “new commandment”?!

The “**newness**” isn’t so much a matter of never having heard words like this before. It is a matter of the mode of this LOVE... the depth and type of this LOVE.

LOVE one another in the same way I have loved you... What this commandment calls for... is for us to embody the same humble, servant, self-sacrificing, unconditional LOVE that Jesus showed his disciples – in his washing of their feet... the same humble, servant, self-sacrificing, unconditional LOVE that Jesus would show to the whole world – in his dying on the cross.

The “**newness**” is also found in *the purpose* of our living out this way of humble, self-giving LOVE—our witness to the world.

I think it is telling that, in this final conversation with his disciples before his arrest and crucifixion, Jesus does NOT talk about the importance of the Bible... or a carefully constructed creed / statement of faith—as important as these things might be for our life together in the church... to ground us / keep us centered in God.

What Jesus wanted us to know, apparently, was that although people would (throughout history) fight over who held correct beliefs... that churches would fight and split / divide over proper interpretation of scripture / right doctrinal understanding, this was NOT Jesus’ primary concern.

Jesus’ way was the way of little children... “*Little children,*” he says, “*I give you a new commandment...*” One simple (but very difficult) commandment—“*LOVE one another... as I have LOVED you. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have LOVE for one another.*”

This commandment is NOT about the details of what you believe... or how well you can articulate it. It is about how you live. It is about how you LOVE. It is about how you show the LOVE of Christ in and through your daily lives—what you say... what you do... how you treat people... what you stand up for / against...

Do we take seriously enough that this commandment to LOVE is at the center of our faith?! Because it is both the center of Jesus' teaching... and the center of the Christian life. It is what draws / holds us together... and what "shows others" that we belong to Jesus. **Our LOVE for one another** is to be our strongest witness to the world around us...

When I really think about this... it makes me cringe / cry – the way that we—“Christians”—have treated each other / our neighbors down through the years... to this day...

- We have turned the Gospel into a weapon that we can use against others... instead of a tool for healing and bringing us together...
- We have used it to draw lines... to separate ourselves from those we don't like / those who have hurt us / those who are *different* from us / those we don't understand—lines that *block / exclude* rather than *welcome / include*...
- We have used it to tear relationships apart... lives apart... hearts apart...
- We have defined the “one another” so tightly that it has come to mean only “*love those who reinforce my own way of thinking... what I think is right...*”

For Jesus, LOVE isn't just a feeling. It is action. It is a way of life. It is actively LOVING—putting this LOVE (*agape* LOVE)—into real-world / everyday encounters and situations...

The LOVE that Jesus commands here is all about the other person. It is NOT just being *nice*. It is NOT just loving those who love us back... or those who “deserve” to be LOVED...

This is *agape* LOVE—a LOVE that requires total commitment and trust! It is the kind of LOVE with which God loves us, a LOVE that should be the model of the LOVE we have for others.

The kind of LOVE might require us to open doors that we have closed against others... to respond to appeals that cry out for our help (even if we don't want to)... to forgive oversights or mistakes of others... to change our ways / perspectives. This LOVE opens our eyes to facts that we might otherwise overlook (or ignore).

Remember: When Jesus set this example, Judas was there... and so was Peter. Their upcoming betrayal / denial did NOT exclude them from his LOVE.

That's what *agape* LOVE is. It is unconditional... inclusive... forgiving... humble... sacrificial...

“This is how all will know that [we] are [his] disciples, if [we] have love for one another.”

One simple commandment... BUT there is nothing *simple* or *easy* about honoring and keeping it – even with our closest friends and family members... much less our neighbors, especially those we don't like.

The truth of the matter is this: we do at least *try* “LOVE one another” as Jesus' commands... BUT we also fail to “LOVE one another,” don't we?! We need to acknowledge both of these truths. Sometimes we succeed... sometimes we fail. The good news is that Jesus' LOVE—covers us... both when we succeed and when we fail. *That* is the promise of the cross that we cling to.

Jesus went to the cross to show us just *how much* God really does LOVE us... just *how far* God's forgiveness and grace reach.

Jesus gave himself over to death on the cross to show us that God *is* LOVE... and that we, as God's children, *are* LOVED—in spite of our sinfulness and brokenness... in spite of our shortcomings and failures.

In Jesus, we see and experience God’s perfect LOVE—agape LOVE—a LOVE that knows no bounds!

It is *this* LOVE that inspires us... and empowers us... to keep trying to live out this commandment—

- To see others through the lens of LOVE like Jesus did...
- To choose LOVE in our interactions with one another—for the sake of a different way to live in the world.
- To “LOVE one another” as Jesus has LOVED us!

Why? So the world can come a little bit closer to knowing God’s LOVE... in / through us!