

A New Command (Part One)

“Love one another”

John 13:31-35

After years of ministry, here’s what I’ve figured out – finally – that we do best to understand this church, that we have a vision for this church, as a place where we learn to live a life of love. With this in mind I begin a new series of weekly essays focused on the “The Last Great New Command” drawn from the text John 13:31-35. It was the night before Jesus’ crucifixion, and Jesus and his disciples are together in the upper room. So in our minds let’s go back to that evening and try again to visualize it.

There had been dissension in the room. Voices were raised. The apostles had been back on their old topic, “Which one of them was the greatest?” Some thought it was Peter; likely Peter thought it was Peter. But Judas was the treasurer, and that counted for something too. Some likely thought it was James. He was pretty impressive. Sometime later when Herod tried to wipe out the early Christian movement, it was James he seized first and killed. But then Jesus got up from the meal, took off his outer clothing, wrapped a towel around his waist and began to wash their feet.

So the meal went on. It was special. It was Passover. Until Jesus dropped into the Seder the warning that one of them was going to betray him. They were thunderstruck and began to quiz one another and Jesus. When questioned, Jesus seemed to indicate Judas, but nobody apparently picked up on that. He was the one they trusted with the money bag. And when he got up to leave the room, no one seems to have thought much about it.

At any rate, it was then after Judas left, that Jesus began to talk. He talked a lot that night. But here’s what he said first, “A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another.”

What he’s saying is this: You’re going to have to love Peter, impulsive, unsteady, overbearing Peter, so quick to shoot his mouth off, but not always too good on the follow-through; Thomas, so darn independent-minded, never willing to take another’s word for things; James and John, “Sons of Thunder,” quick to call down fire on people, quick to assume that they would sit on the right and left hand of Jesus; Simon the Zealot, with that hint of menace still in his eyes; Andrew, Philip, Bartholomew, James, Alphaeus’ son, and Thaddeus, not even that impressive a group. You’re going to have to love one another. You have to be able to count on one another. To survive the next three days, you’ll have to love one another. To make it through the crises of life that sooner or later come to everyone, you’ll have to love one another. And certainly to save, to rescue, to heal the world, to bring an end to centuries-old animosities, to feed the hungry and shelter the homeless, to convince the world that God is love, to teach people to trust God, to spread forgiveness where there is only hatred, you have to be able to love another. In fact, that’s the way people will be able to tell if you’re following me, Jesus says.

Yet, even though this was Jesus’ last great new command, the one to supplant all others, two thousand years later as Christians we still struggle to love. A lot of it is lifestyle, even the

insatiable demands of “the American dream.” We don’t have time in our lives to love. We don’t have space in our lives to really love. We don’t have space in our minds to love. We’re far too often distracted, anxious and fearful. We’re too attached to things to love people. We’re too attached to our notions of how our houses or lives or communities or schools should look to love people. Sometimes we’re too attached to people to love people, too emotionally needy to love people, too desperate for their approval, too afraid of their rejection, too dependent on them for how we feel about ourselves. And so we struggle to love.

Here perhaps is the missing piece. We suppose that love just happens. If we are good, we will just naturally be loving. But suppose it doesn’t just happen. Suppose love takes work. Suppose it takes focus. Suppose it’s something we learn to do. I think it is. I think it takes learning.

So where do we learn to love? I think of a passage like 1 Corinthians 13 (you likely remember it, “Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy) in which Paul, far from being sentimental or romantic, is reprimanding the Christians in Corinth, in effect, saying, “Don’t you know love is not envious, love is not boastful, love is not proud? Don’t you know love is not rude, it’s not self-seeking, it’s not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs, it does not delight in evil but rejoices in the truth? Don’t you know love always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always lasts?” Paul is exhorting, almost reprimanding, the church in Corinth because he has a vision for the church, a vision he shares with Jesus, and he knows the salvation of the world – the safety, the security, the future of the world – depends on this vision of a place where love reigns, where it’s learned and practiced and spread.

Everyone on earth needs such a place.

– Dale Pauls

Part Two (of two) next week