

**“What’s New About That?”  
John 13:31-35**

**“I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another.”** At first read, it doesn’t sound that new. If our minds and hearts are open to the scriptures, we’ve heard it all along. Way back in Leviticus we hear, **“You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against any of your people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself.”**<sup>1</sup> The Ten Commandments basically fall into two directions: loving God and loving neighbor. So when Jesus was asked one day which was the greatest commandment, he summarized the Ten Commandments this way: **“You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.’ This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’”**<sup>2</sup>

Though it doesn’t sound new, Jesus makes more than a subtle change that might be disconcerting. **“Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another.”** Ouch! Don’t you wish we did. Don’t you wish we could!

That change in the “greatest commandment” might make you feel more than a bit inadequate. It would be as if you were learning to play the violin and Itsaac Pearlman came up to you and said, “Just as I play the violin, you also should play the violin.” Or if you are a golfer, how would you feel if Tiger Woods was waiting to tee off after you and said, “Just as I play golf, you also should play golf!” Or, if you were hosting a dinner party and Martha Stewart knocked on your door and said, “Just as I throw a party, you also should throw a party!” Yeah! Right!

If Itsaac Pearlman, Tiger Woods or Martha Stewart should ever issue a challenge to imitate them we know we can’t, not by a long shot. Jesus, however, expects that we can. His love for us is the only resource we need to love as he loved. His love is empowering because he loves us for who we are, not for anything we do. Only such love enables us to accept who we are and become all we were meant to be.

I’m thinking now of an old African-American spiritual:

There is a balm in Gilead to make the wounded whole.

There is a balm in Gilead to heal the sin-sick soul.

If you cannot preach like Peter, If you cannot pray like Paul,

You can tell the love of Jesus And say, “He died for all.”

That sings good news for me! I know I can’t preach like Peter, nor like anybody else for that matter. That’s not my calling. My calling is to be who God made me to be and, in my own inimitable way, to tell the old, old story of Jesus and his love and, in my own inimitable way, to live out that love in my own life. I know my words and my deeds pale when compared to Jesus’ love, but somehow I don’t feel inadequate, even though I know I am. What would make me feel inadequate would be if I didn’t even try.

I believe that is true for all who would be followers of Jesus. We want to take seriously his command to love one another *as he loved us*, but let us not think that our love for others can ever be as broad and inclusive, as deep and as generous, as forgiving and as merciful, and, yes, as sacrificial as Jesus' love is for us. Let us not deceive ourselves into thinking we're some kind of Messiah. That's not our calling. Our calling is to be who God created us to be and to allow the love of Christ to be at home in our lives and to transform us that we would more nearly reflect his image and love. The operative words in that sentence are *more nearly*. On this side of God's kingdom, we are at best broken images of the Christ.

Having said that, let us not forget how critical it is to love one another, even if our love is broken or incomplete. The thought that we should love one another as Jesus loves us appears two times in the New Testament. The shorter phrase, *love one another*, appears 12 times. Why is that so critical? Our love for one another speaks volumes to the world about who we are and whose we are.

**“By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another”** Jesus said. The first letter of John says, **“We know that we have passed from death to life because we love one another.”**<sup>3</sup> It's not the doctrines we espouse, or the style of worship, or the genre of hymns we sing, or being on the “right side” of the 101 issues we like to fight about, it's our love for one another that communicates the gospel to the world. It's our love for one another that confirms we are alive in Christ and not buried in religion. That's why Jesus prayed so fervently for the unity of the church – **“So that the world may know that you have sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me.”**<sup>4</sup>

By love, I certainly don't mean sentimental, sappy, syrupy love. I mean a love that genuinely cares and respects others, and never ceases to work for their well-being, even those with whom you may disagree. That's what the world needs to hear from us – to show how to live in unity in the midst of all our diversity, to show how to disagree agreeably!

The church has the potential of doing that because it is universal. It's members come from every nation on the face of the earth. We are multi-racial, multi-cultural, multi-faceted in our theological understandings. We have various abilities and disabilities yet we are one in this regard – we confess Jesus as Lord and Savior. Unfortunately, some battles within the church don't sound much different than the battles fought among nations with each one trying to destroy the enemy. Yet I heard it yesterday morning as I met with the newly elected officers to help prepare them for ordination / installation. One person said, “I still believe that in spite of all the problems and failings of the church, it remains the best force for good in the world.” I believe that, too, especially when love for one another trumps all the other things we try to do.

This little parable from the writings of Henry Nouwen is helpful:

A mosaic consists of thousands of little stones. Some are blue, some are green, some are yellow, some are gold. When we bring our faces close to the mosaic, we can admire the beauty of each stone. But as we step back from it, we can see that all

these little stones reveal to us a beautiful picture, telling a story none of these stones can tell by itself.

That is what our live in community is about. Each of us is like a little stone, but together we reveal the face of God to the world. Nobody can say, "I make God visible." But others who see us together can say, "They make God visible." Community is where humility and glory touch.<sup>5</sup>

*"Together we reveal the face of God to the world."* We aren't just any old stones found along a creek. The Bible says that each one of us is a precious stone. **"Present yourselves as building stones for the construction of a sanctuary vibrant with life, in which you'll serve as holy priests offering Christ-approved lives up to God."**<sup>6</sup>

As we live and worship and work together, with love for one another, the world will see the face of God and what God's kingdom will look like.

#### Endnotes

1. Leviticus 19:18
2. Matthew 22:36-39
3. 1 John 3:14
4. John 17:23
5. Henri J. M Nouwen, *Bread for the Journey*, May 1 (San Francisco: Harper, ©1997)
6. 1 Peter 2:5 (*The Message*)