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St. Stephen's Church – Edina, Minnesota
9:00 and 11:00 a.m. Celebrations of the Holy Eucharist
The Fifth Sunday of Easter, Year C
April 24, 2016

“An Old, New Commandment

Scripture: John 13:31-35

“I give you a new commandment,” says Jesus, “that you love one another.” Whew! For a second there I thought Jesus was going to tell us to do something difficult.

Love, love, love. It's written all over the scriptures. “Love God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength.” “Love your neighbor as yourself.” “Let us love then, because God first loved us.” “If I speak with the tongues of mortals and of angels, but have not love, I am nothing.” “By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.” And how about this one?: “I say to you, love your enemies.”

I'm beginning to see the pattern here. We get right down to the point in Jesus' life where he knows he is soon headed out to the cross, and the last big admonition he passes along to his followers is: “Love one another.” He doesn't pass along any

big book of regulations; he doesn't hand them his diaries filled with his teachings and musings and memories and requirements. He doesn't have his portrait painted. He doesn't tell them to storm the Temple; he doesn't ask them to plan his rescue. He doesn't list out the proper "do's: and "don'ts" for a successful life. He doesn't give out a lot of sage moral advice on all the issues of the day. His time is short, and he chooses simply to say, "Love one another." And that's not even really a new commandment, is it? Of course we know God wants us to love each other. That comes from nearly all the way back at the beginning of the Bible: "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and soul and mind and strength... and you shall love your neighbor as yourself."

But if all Jesus really said was, "Love one another," maybe there wouldn't be anything else for me to say. But that isn't all he said. He had to go on and explain himself a little bit, and that makes all the difference in the world. So what did he say? He said, "Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another."

So, wait a minute. What you mean, Jesus, is that the way you invite us to be a part of your life though we aren't always particularly good, or necessarily smart, or consistently faithful, or very likeable... we're supposed to love each other like that?

Or the way you love us in spite of our insecurity and our vanity and our stubbornness... that's the way we are to love each other? Or the way you love us even when we don't much act like we love you... that's the way we are to love others, even when they don't much act like they love us? The way you love us so much that you are willing to put our well-being ahead of your own and give away your own life in order for our lives to be better... that's how we should love others?

This is not a simple thing, is it? Somewhat ironic, isn't it, that near the end of his life, Jesus gives the briefest of commandments, takes only a couple of seconds to relay it to us, yet we will spend the rest of our lives interpreting just what that commandment means and how we will do it?

And how will we do it? Well... I've heard the story of the man who wanted so desperately to learn to carve wood, so for years he sought the world over to find the finest wood carver of the day, and finally coming into his workshop, he noticed an exquisitely carved statue of a dog. And he approached the wood carver and told him he had sought the world over to find the best carver in the world, so he could learn to carve something so beautiful as that dog. And he said to the carver, "How do you do

it?” And the wood carver, without a moment’s hesitation, said: “I take a big piece of wood and cut off everything that doesn’t look like a dog.”

We have a lifetime to fashion ourselves with the kind of love of which Jesus speaks; it’s the work we have been given to do. It’s the best thing we will do with our lives, the thing that will matter most and, if we manage to do it, the thing that will last the longest. And how will we do it? Take that life we have been given and whittle away everything that doesn’t look like love. Paul’s letter to the Corinthians offers a good guide. You know the passage... “Love is patient; love is kind...” If it isn’t patient and kind, whittle it away. If it is envious or boastful or arrogant or rude, it’s got to go. Paul says love doesn’t insist on its own way, nor is it resentful. Where we find such in our lives, we can whittle that away too. We keep whittling and whittling until what we are left with is a life that looks like love for one another.

Didn’t Jesus do just that? Did he not shape a life that was caring, forgiving, healing, risky, and generous? Did he not concern himself with the well-being of others? Did he not feed hungry people, welcome the outcast, forgive the sinner, heal the sick? Did he not hold onto love even in the face of misunderstanding and hate? See? This is why Jesus’ commandment is new. We are no longer only to love our

neighbor as we love ourselves; or to love only those who love us; to love our friends and hate our enemies; to love as long as we agree; to love when it seems safe. Jesus commands that we love beyond ourselves, approaching that love with which he loves us. And the only way I see to live such love is to accept that this is our work, our purpose, our commandment, and to trust that he is working through us even now. We are to open ourselves to the needs of others, love as we are asked to love, and then whittle away everything in our lives that doesn't look like love.