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St. Stephen's Church – Edina, Minnesota
9:00 and 11:15 a.m. Celebrations of the Holy Eucharist
The Fifth Sunday of Easter; May 19, 2019

“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. No... really, wouldn't it just be a lot easier if Jesus just said, “If you want to be my follower, all it takes is three easy payments of \$19.99. We understand that, right? Just pay up, and you get something in return. But that's the thing about the love Jesus talks about... you can't buy it, because he's giving it away for free.

I know you hear about it all the time from this pulpit. I talk about it. Amelia talks about it. Love, love, love. But to be fair... it is written all over the scriptures, right? “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.” “I say to you, love your enemies.” “By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.”

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. We get right down to the point in Jesus’ life where he knows his time is short... but he doesn’t pass along any big book of regulations; he doesn’t hand the disciples his diaries filled with his teachings and requirements. He doesn’t have his portrait painted. He doesn’t tell them to storm the Temple or 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 then he adds, “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 love us even we aren’t always particularly good, or necessarily smart, or consistently faithful, or very likable... we’re supposed to love other people who are like that? Or the way you love us even when we don’t much act like we love you... we’re supposed to love others, even when they don’t much act like they love us? The way that you put our well-being ahead of your own, so our lives could be better... we’re supposed to love others like that?

Now, *that* is not a simple thing, is it? Somewhat ironic that 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 figuring out how to do it? So, how will we do it? Well... you might have heard the legend of the way Michelangelo explained how he carved the famous statue of King David. When asked how he did it, he supposedly said that he took a big block of marble and chipped away everything that didn't look like David.

We have one 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? Well, we take that life we have been given, and, little by little, we chip away everything that doesn't look like love. I think 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, chip 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. When we are selfish and resentful, we can chip that away too. We keep chipping and chipping until what we are left with is a life that looks a lot like love for one another.

And 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 hatred? I mean, he practiced what he preached. So, 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. When Jesus tells his friends to love one another just as he loves them, he forever removes any question that love is to be a transaction, *quid pro quo*. You know... *You love me, and I will love you in return. You give me something, and I will give you something in return.* I once read a story of a journalist who watched Mother Teresa caring for a sick man, cleaning his wounds and comforting him in his pain and fever, and the journalist said, "I wouldn't do that for a million dollars." And Mother Teresa said, "I wouldn't do it for a million dollars either. But I would do it for the love of [Jesus]."¹

When Jesus asks us friends to love others just as he loves us, he is asking us to love others no matter the potential return on investment.

¹ Gleaned from preachersexchange.com, Page II, Section 3 from Brian Gleeson CP.