

A Brand-New Instruction

John 13:31-35

INTRODUCTION

How do I love thee? Let me count the ways.
I love thee to the depth and breadth and height
My soul can reach, when feeling out of sight
For the ends of being and ideal grace.
I love thee to the level of every day's
Most quiet need, by sun and candle-light.
I love thee freely, as men strive for right.
I love thee purely, as they turn from praise.
I love thee with the passion put to use
In my old griefs, and with my childhood's faith.
I love thee with a love I seemed to lose
With my lost saints. I love thee with the breath,
Smiles, tears, of all my life; and, if God choose,
I shall but love thee better after death.

That was, of course, Elizabeth Barrett Browning's famous Sonnet 43. The sonnet asks the all-important question "How do I love thee?"

- And then it challenges us to count the ways she is about to list. How many did you count?
- I came up with eight ways. When you get home this afternoon you can check to see if I am right.

Today's text is about everyone's favorite subject: love.

- Karen and I have a niece named Hannah who was giving the bridesmaid toast at her sister's wedding, and she gushed "I am in love with love."
- Aren't we all?

Last Sunday, I told you that the Gospel of John takes great effort to set the teachings of Jesus in a particular context. The circumstances surrounding the teaching always add a brand-new dimension to the actual words Jesus speaks.

At first glance, our Gospel text isn't a brand-new teaching at all. The Jews have heard it their entire lives – and those of us who have been in church circles know it well too.

We remember that the Pharisees tried to trap Jesus in a theological argument one day – they were always doing things like that – so they asked Him to identify the greatest commandment. They were thinking, of course, that whichever one He picked, they would argue for a different one.

- If He said "Thou shalt not covet" they would respond "Well, what about honoring your parents?"
- But Jesus responded instead with those commandments you know well:

Jesus replied: "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: Love your neighbor as yourself." (Matthew 22:37-39)

Instead of arguing with them, Jesus told them two commandments that every Jew knew from way back in the books of the Law.

Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength. (Deuteronomy 6:5)

Love your neighbor as yourself. (Leviticus 19:18)

So in today's text, Jesus once again commands people to love each other. What is brand-new about love? We've heard it before. But remember the context! Our text begins like this:

When he was gone, Jesus said ... (John 13:31)

When "who" was gone? Judas.

- John 13 is the story of the Last Supper. This chapter begins with Jesus washing the feet of His disciples.
- He also reminds them again that He is about to be handed over for crucifixion, betrayed by one of His own disciples.
- And that's when Judas leaves the room.
- And that's when Jesus tells them to love one another.

But in this passage today, Jesus adds a brand-new twist to this very old commandment. He doesn't say:

Love your neighbor as yourself." (Matthew 22:39)

No, this is a new commandment. Jesus says:

As I have loved you, so you must love one another.

Do you see the brand-new twist? Not "as yourself." But "as I have loved you."

What difference does that make? How does Jesus want us to love?

If you are like me, the first thought that came to your mind was a similar statement by Jesus:

Greater love has no one than this: to lay down one's life for one's friends. (John 15:13)

That statement, however, doesn't appear for another two chapters (John 15:13). Here Jesus is not talking about the kind of love that we might describe as the ultimate

sacrifice. Here He is simply saying *"Tonight in this room you have seen me love you in a brand-new way. Now, you love others as I have loved you."*

How does Jesus love us? Let me count the ways. I am only going to count to three.

#1: HE WASHED THEIR FEET

This chapter begins with the story of Jesus washing His disciples' feet.

He got up from the meal, took off his outer clothing, and wrapped a towel around his waist. After that, he poured water into a basin and began to wash his disciples' feet, drying them with the towel that was wrapped around him. (John 13:4-5)

We often make a big deal of the servanthood component of this story, and so we should. But this was also a hygienic need for people in that day. Since people reclined as they ate, their feet were in the faces of other people. So washing feet was both hospitable and necessary. I can just picture Jewish mothers calling their kids to dinner by saying, "Tommy, time for dinner. Go wash your feet."

What Jesus did for his disciples was not a difficult thing. It took no great skill set. There was no advanced planning that had to occur. He simply looked around the room and saw a need. It was clear that one else was prepared to wash the disciples' feet, so He did it.

- In that action – in the meeting of a simple but important need – Jesus said "I love you" to those gathered in that Upper Room.
- Instead of getting into an argument about whose job it was, Jesus just did it.

There are a host of these types of loving actions occurring in our congregation – far more than we as a staff can track or tally. Members of this congregation are providing food, running errands, taking others to doctors' appointments, mowing yards, listening to expressed concerns, and so on.

- In the same way that Jesus said "I love you" to those first disciples by washing their feet before the Passover meal, we too say "I love you" to those whose needs we meet because you know that is how Jesus loved you.
- When you know how Jesus loved you, you never gripe about doing a loving action for someone else. You just do it.

When it comes to the really big things that people need, individually you and I may not be much help. Those might take planning and recruiting. But washing feet? That's not a big deal. It is a simple act ... we can do those, right? We can love like that.

#2: HE WAS AUTHENTIC WITH THEM

in John 13:21, we read these words:

Jesus was troubled in spirit and testified, "Very truly I tell you, one of you is going to betray me." (John 13:21)

Focus on the words "Jesus was troubled in spirit." Based on the text, it was apparent to the rest of the disciples that something was bothering Jesus. And while they didn't immediately understand it – they eventually would – the authenticity demonstrated by Jesus resonated within each of the disciples.

- Each would ask, "Is this because of me? Is it I, Lord?"

Being authentic allows our fellow Christians and those not yet a part of the family of faith to know and understand that real life happens to every Christian. Not even Jesus was exempt.

- Being "authentic," being "real" is both a way of experiencing love and a way of expressing it. But it is often hard work before you get there.

In the classic children's book, *The Velveteen Rabbit*, the Rabbit and Skin Horse talk about how hard it is to be real -- a frightening thought to the Rabbit. But the Skin Horse offers these words:

It takes a long time. That's why it doesn't happen often to people who break easily, or have sharp edges, or who have to be carefully kept. Generally, by the time you are Real, most of your hair has been loved off, and your eyes drop out and you get loose in the joints and very shabby. But these things don't matter at all, because once you are Real you can't be ugly, except to people who don't understand."

Here all this time, I thought I was getting old. Turns out, I was just getting real.

Jesus showed His love for His disciples by being real right before their eyes. He didn't try to shelter them from the difficult times, but allowed them to be present when things were troubling. He didn't put on a fake smile. He was real. It might be hard to let people see what is going on inside, but you can do that, right? It's how Jesus loved you.

#3: HE STUCK WITH THEM EVEN WHEN THEY GOT IT WRONG

The official text for today's sermon begins with these words I quoted earlier:

When he was gone...

This is the phrase that made this passage brand-new for me. Once Judas was gone ...

In the words of the text that follow, Jesus tells the remaining disciples that "tonight is the night." He plainly states that "*I will be with you only a little longer*" (v. 33). But He waited to say that until Judas was gone. Why?

I think it was because He loved Judas. He knew that Judas had a role to play, and He knew that the rest of those hot-headed disciples would interfere with it. Judas had it wrong, but even then Jesus continued to love him.

- Peter would get it wrong and deny Jesus. But Jesus continued to love him.
- Thomas would get it wrong and question the truth of the resurrection. But Jesus continued to love him.
- All of the disciples, except for John, would get it wrong and would hide as Jesus went to the cross. But Jesus continued to love them.
- He didn't write anybody off. It's a good thing because ...

You and I get it wrong fairly frequently too. But Jesus continues to love us. And He asks us to continue to love in that way when those around us get it wrong as well.

You can do that, right? When people break their promises, when they break your heart, when they make decisions that go contrary to what they and you know to be right, when you are trying to help them but they won't let you... Even then you can continue to love them, because you know that is how Jesus loves you, right?

APPLICATION

The famous British preacher G. Campbell Morgan had five sons who were also preachers. One day Morgan and his wife took their five boys to lunch, and during the meal he asked them "Who in our family is the greatest preacher?"

- In unison those five preacher sons said, "Mom." Mrs. Morgan never actually preached a sermon, but she was known as a very loving person. Through the way she lived her life she impacted others more than any sermon her famous husband and five sons had ever preached.

The brand-new responsibility of those who follow Jesus – then and now – is to love the people around them just as Christ loved.

- His love is the standard. "As I have loved you."

Those early disciples would certainly need this kind of love in the hours to follow, when their Master would be arrested ... Betrayed by one of them ... Denied by one of them ... Abandoned by all of them.

There is only one thing that could have brought them together again: their willingness to love in a brand-new way like Jesus loved them.

- Some people will only experience the love of Jesus as they see it expressed by those who have been truly loved by Jesus. You and me.

A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another. (John 13:34-35)

Amen.