

New Command, Different Glory

In some ways, this is a very straightforward teaching from Jesus but in some ways it seems complex, even confusing. We can certainly understand that Jesus is emphasizing to his disciples that they must love one another. That seems very direct, very simple in expression, if difficult to always follow. We understand that Jesus puts the force of a commandment on this charge to his disciples. It is not a request, it is not optional. We call this day Maundy Thursday in the Church calendar, a slurring of the Latin word in this verse for commandment, "mandatum." We remember that Jesus commanded his disciples to love one another; again, simple enough. But what did he mean by calling this a "new commandment"? Surely, this is just another form of the commandment in Leviticus 19:18, "you shall love your neighbor as yourself." Jesus has cited that commandment earlier in his ministry. All three Synoptic Gospels, Matthew, Mark and Luke tell some version of the story. In Mark 12:28-31, we read: "One of the teachers of the law came and heard them debating. Noticing that Jesus had given them a good answer, he asked him, "Of all the commandments, which is the most important?" "The most important one," answered Jesus, "is this: 'Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one. Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.' The second is this: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.' There is no commandment greater than these.""

So how can Jesus rephrase a commandment he has previously cited as part of the summation of the law and the teachings of the prophets and call it new? What is the difference, subtle in our eyes and ears, between the old and the new that Jesus finds so crucial? I believe it is this: Jesus said, "Just as I have loved you..."

"Just as I have loved you..." Jesus calls on his disciples to love one another in the same way in which he has loved them and he lays this responsibility on them only moments after one of his dear friends, Judas, has left the Seder dinner to go and betray him to the authorities, who will surely kill him. Jesus knows he is going to die. He does not wish to die but he understands that this is the ultimate act of love for him to perform on behalf of his friends. He is willing to die so that they (and we) may live because he loves them so. And now he says to them, and to us, "love one another just as I have loved you."

How many of us, I wonder, would be willing to die for someone else? For our children, perhaps, or grandchildren or spouse? For our nearest and dearest? How many of us would be willing to die for a fellow disciple, for one of our brothers and sisters in Christ? For someone in this room? For a member of the church down the street? For a member of a church in the next town? For a Christian on the other side of the world? "Love one another as I have loved you" is a world apart from "love your neighbor as you love yourself;" it is a new thing entirely. It is one thing to esteem another human being as well as we consider ourselves; to hold their desires as important as our own. But to love so much that we are willing to die for them, to put the needs of others above our own... And yet that is exactly what Jesus, and Paul after him, calls us to do.

But perhaps we are off the hook. After all, just before giving this command, Jesus says, "Where I am going, you cannot come." He must know that we cannot live up to his command! He surely cannot expect us to follow after him in giving our all for others. But just a few verses later, Jesus says, "I go to prepare a place for you... and if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and take you to myself, so that where I am, there you may be also." We cannot go where Jesus has gone when we are holding on to our old lives. We cannot cling to what we see

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as our rights and still love one another as Jesus loves us. But by going ahead of us, Jesus is preparing for us, preparing by sending the Holy Spirit to fill us with God's love, not only so we can enter the presence of God after we die but so we can live in God's will and show God's love in this world.

This command to love so unselfishly, remember, comes immediately after Judas leaves the room to trigger the process that leads to Jesus' death. Even before Jesus takes the opportunity to give his disciples this command, he reflects on what Judas' action means for him. "Now the Son of Man has been glorified, and God has been glorified in him." It seems like another odd thing to say but perhaps you will remember the writing of Rev. Dr. J. Barry Vaughn, which I quoted a few Sundays ago: "For us glory is about having more: more money, more prestige, more power. For Jesus, glory was about giving more." Vaughn recalls the opening of John's Gospel, which says, "we beheld his glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth." Vaughn writes, "The Word Incarnate heals the sick, feeds the multitude, raises the dead, and finally completes his task by dying on the cross..." That is how we beheld his glory, through his giving, even to his own life.

Jesus commands us to love one another as he loved us, to love one another enough to give everything, even our lives, for one another. It sounds ridiculous on the face of it, does it not? Patently absurd. But remember the words of Paul to the Corinthians: "we preach Christ crucified: a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, but to those whom God has called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God." And, I would add, Christ, the love of God. For the love of God expressed to us through the life and teachings and death of Jesus and in anticipation of the resurrection, thanks be to God.