

Another Perspective

In 1999, a journalist named Lee Strobel published a book called The Case for Christ. In it, Strobel documented how he, a lifelong skeptic and non-believer in religion, had become a convinced Christian by applying his skills as an investigative journalist to the Gospel stories about Jesus. He interviewed a number of theologians and Biblical scholars to help him answer questions about the origins and meaning of the Gospels and found that, rather than a mythic story full of holes, as he expected, that the Gospels held up very well as the transmitted testimonies of eyewitnesses to a real-life but extraordinary series of events.

One of the first tests Strobel applied to the testimony of the Gospels was the test of consistency. Based on his years of experience as a reporter of criminal cases and investigator of stories, Strobel knew that true eyewitness accounts would have some variation in details but consistency in the overall thread of a story. Different people notice and remember different things and people are likely to paraphrase the words of another while retaining the sense of what the first person has said. Strobel became satisfied that Matthew, Mark, Luke and John or those who'd told them the Jesus stories were reporting with normal human accuracy on something that had actually happened and teachings that they'd heard from Jesus.

The normal reading for a service on Maundy Thursday is from John 13, where John's telling of the story of the Last Supper actually contains the word to which the name of the day refers: *mandamus*, the Latin for commandment. Listen to verses from that reading and, as you do so, listen for similarities to the Scripture from Luke which I read a moment ago: "I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another."

Whatever witnesses Luke relied on for his version of that important evening did not remember a new commandment from Jesus. Instead, they remembered his intervention in a quarrel between his disciples. Nevertheless, the message, the sense of Jesus' words, is similar enough to render both accounts quite believable. In Luke's story, Jesus tells the disciples vying for leadership that they must be ready to serve each other, just as he has served them. John says that Jesus held himself up as the paradigm for the love they were to show one another.

For Jesus, the ideas of love and service were closely intertwined. Just a little later in John's account, Jesus tells his disciples, "No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends." In Luke, the story of the squabbling disciples comes almost immediately after Jesus gives them the bread, his body given for them, and the cup, the new covenant in his blood. He is symbolically preparing them for the great sacrifice he is about to make on their behalf and on ours.

As followers of Jesus, we still understand mutual service to be an important component of active love. Whenever I counsel couples before a wedding, I always point them to the words in Paul's letter to the Ephesians which have been so often misapplied by men. I encourage them to read all of what Paul says about Christian households, beginning with "Be subject to one another out of reverence for Christ." The core of loving, according to Paul, whether it be between husband and wife, brother and sister, colleagues, co-workers or friends, is to put the needs of the other ahead of our own. In moving through this world, we are to become like the least in a group, like a servant. To be the true followers of Jesus, we must love one another as he loved us.

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Jesus was called by God to do something that none of us is called to do. He was called to suffer and die, not just for his friends, not just for his country, not just for those of his faith, but for all of Creation across all time. His was the one perfect sacrifice, never before attempted, never again required. As we read together the account of that dreadful yet holy day, listen for the evidence of the deep and abiding love of Jesus, wrapped in the mystery of atonement, and consider how that love calls to you to walk more closely in the way of Jesus, in the way of a servant, in the way of love, in all the days to come.