

This is what I ask you to do: Love one another. Just as I have loved you, so you must love each other John 13:35. For Jesus, God's most beautiful and holy word is love. Love is central. It is the heart of true goodness. It is the one irremovable commandment. It is the essence of God's dealing with humanity. Intimacy is at the very crux of time and eternity. Today, even among secular unbelievers, when they want to express a most noble and unselfish human passion, life-sacrificing stuff, they still fall back on the word love. It still echoes with beauty and hope.

Jesus at the last supper challenged his disciples to allow love to be the key to their lives together; it was his new commandment. "This is what I ask you to do: Love one another. Just as I have loved you, so you must love each other." John 13:35 Have you ever wondered why he called it the 'new' commandment? Already he had taught that the second most important commandment was "to love your neighbor as yourself. So what is new about this later statement? It is new because it is a special command given to his followers, to the infant church. It is not spoken to the general population. Therefore, speaking to his close friends, he calls it a new commandment. It is a particular responsibility laid upon the people of faith. They, above all people, have a special responsibility in how they care for one another. But there is a second way in which it is new: because this love is his own special brand of love: love each

other just as I have loved you. It is an embodied love. That is the only way we can recognize it. The best definition of love is seen in a loving person. Jesus asked the members of the young church to love each other with his quality of love. Like a diamond, Jesus love is a multifaceted love. You may have heard the statement, love is not a feeling, it is an action. As we examine the Jesus-type-love we see that in reality it is both. Not some ooey goey type warm fuzzy feeling but an emotion fraught with dignity and played out in action.

The first facet is RESPECT: The Jesus-type-love respects others. Respect takes the other person, with their dignity and rights, very seriously. Respect recognizes the God-given unique and precious nature of another person. It does not look down on another, nor talk down nor put down. Each follower of Jesus was a unique, invaluable child of God. No matter what their sins, each was of immeasurable value to their Creator. Jesus called them to be disciples. He did not bully them or use superior cunning to manipulate them. He called, they could refuse or accept. They could later leave him if they wished, as some in fact did. He simply spent time with them, challenging, encouraging, rebutting, and teasing out their comprehension of the utter grace of God. Respect is a high love-quality. Later Paul will write in his words to married couples, "husbands, love your wives and wives, respect your husbands."

HONESTY: The second facet of Jesus' love is his honesty. I once heard a most compassionate and competent psychiatrist make the telling comment: "Many church members are not loving enough to be honest with each other." Jesus loved enough to be honest. He was never evasive. He could be annoyed with them about their lack of faith, or question their materialistic values. He was able to praise Nathaniel, rebuke Peter or James and John, and with great understanding deal with doubting Thomas. He did not smile sweetly and pretend that all was okay. He called the bluff of pretence and affirmed all that was good. When there were problems in the church group, he did not look the other way and hope it might go away. His love was open and honest..

FORGIVENESS A third facet of his love was pro-active forgiveness. Not begrudging words after the perpetrator has apologized, but forgiveness which takes the initiative and reaches out to those who have offended. Jesus did not brood on his injuries or nurse resentments or wait for apologies. He reached out and forgave those friends of his, those ordinary members of the embryonic church. Remember the risen Jesus meeting with his disciples on the shore of Lake Galilee? How Jesus asked Peter three times whether Peter really loved him? He gave Peter three opportunities to annul the previous three denials. Now that is forgiveness--- pro-active forgiveness. While forgiveness does not miraculously wipe from your memory

the time when another person hurt you, it can be just as miraculous when you are able to stop nursing the hurt, no longer wanting revenge, no longer deliberately recalling it or slyly referring to the past hurt. You cannot wipe out the memory, but you can refuse to let that memory sour you. Love is forgiving, it allows the other person to move on. How often? Jesus suggested we forgive 70 times 7. That is the genuine, Jesus-quality love.

SACRIFICE Now we come to an unpopular facet of love: sacrifice. In our era, self sacrifice is low on the ratings. Ours is a “me first” society; “keep what I’ve got and grab all I can.” Self-gratification and to hell with everyone else. Moreover it is not merely society at large; selfishness infects the church. Far too many congregations are not prepared to sacrifice their familiar comfort zone in the cause of true love. Something simple -- like changing service times or changing pews for chairs -- can highlight our unwillingness to sacrifice. But there is no Jesus-type love which does not include self-sacrifice. Jesus gave his life for his friends: No person has a greater love than this: that they lay down their life for friends. His love was not seen only in the final sacrifice on the cross; throughout his ministry Jesus gave his life for others. His comfort came a long last. In the early church, in the first stage, they handed over their abilities, time and property for the common good of the people of the church.

Possessions and money were seen as common-wealth. The surprised outsiders knew that these Jesus people were Christians by this quality of their love.

Respect, honesty, pro-active forgiveness, self-sacrifice. Christ's quality love. This is what I ask you to do: Love one another. Just as I have loved you, so you must love each other. John 13:35 Now, I come back to the reminder that this commandment is directed primarily at the church community.

Flash forward a few months. Jesus has been crucified and resurrected. The disciples have walked with him at various times since the resurrection and he has now ascended out of their view. Pentecost has happened and this love-church has grown in leaps and bounds under the new found courage and power of the Holy Spirit. Peter is relaxing, maybe meditating and all of a sudden he has this vision. He wasn't seeking the vision. He didn't want the vision. The vision interrupted his stream of consciousness. And the vision forever changed the definition of Jesus-type love for the church.

Before him he saw every kind of unclean animal and God said take and eat. And Peter, like any good Jew, said no Lord. Never. But God insisted. And goes a step further, "Let no one say what I have made clean is unclean." Wow. In that one statement God wipes away all prejudicial barriers. He has declared that the Jesus-type love is available to everybody, everywhere. This is played out immediately as

Cornelius' people knock on Peter's door, and we know the rest of the story. God embraces his whole household and he is filled with the same Holy Spirit that the disciples had. The interesting thing to note, is not that after they repent and believe and are baptized do they become "clean" but immediately, when they knock on the door, just as they are, Peter goes to Cornelius' house. This is unheard of. There is no socializing between Jew and Gentile, between the clean and the unclean. And even before the power of regeneration, all people have been declared clean.

If God would grant us a sequel to the vision that Peter had this morning, I wonder what we would do with it. If God supernaturally spread the same cloth before us what would it look like? It would be totally clean, empty, void of any living creature for what God has called clean, is clean. And in this brief story, repeated three times by Luke, God emphasizes the universal nature of Jesus-type love. But if God did open up this cloth from heaven and it was empty, what would we do with it? That is the question I have been pondering all week. I think the answer is that we would start putting things back on it. Putting people we consider unclean back on this cloth. ... Like homosexuals. I think there are some of us who would definitely say that homosexuals are unclean not matter about the reconciling nature of the NYAC. ... And let's see, oh, yes.

Those Mexicans that hang out down on the bridge ... there are those among us that surely see those vagrants, waiting for work, as unclean...then there are those former pastors who really screwed up this church... surely they are unclean...and the current pastor...she can really get under my skin, if you ask me I'll be glad to tell you how unclean I think she is...Let's see, who else can we put on this sheet? My spouse! Says one among us who has been hurt and continues to see their once-beloved as a culprit who has stolen their happiness... What about people groups: Palestinians? Muslims? Africans? African-Americans? Hispanics? Japanese? Chinese? Vietnamize? or other? You know, I believe that some of us may even put God on this sheet. God, God's self is unclean, for asking us to love these unlovables. God, God's self is unclean for not delivering the happy life that I've always wanted. Well, the one good thing about that is the others of us who sit on the unclean cloth can take some comfort in the fact that even God, Yes God, fails to meet the standards of some of our hearts and minds as to what is clean and unclean.

Today we are called to empty this sheet. If I had a metal sheet and magnetized cards, I would have you write the unclean you hold in contempt and come up to the altar and put them on the metal sheet.

Name the ones you think that you are better than. Then I would invite you to move to the altar and repent and ask forgiveness for calling what God has said is clean, unclean. I would ask you to pray to open your hearts and fill you with the Jesus-type love and begin to go to these people and enter their homes and fellowship with them, as Peter did Cornelius. But I do not have a metal sheet and magnetized cards. And so instead I will ask you to imagine that this sheet is the unclean sheet that is laid out before us. Now in your imagination write down on your magnetized cards the ones you would put on this metal unclean sheet that has its beginning at the very throne of God. Now as the Holy Spirit moves you, come down and symbolically put those folks on the sheet and then move to the altar or back to your seat and pray that God will help remove the unlovingness in your heart, remove the unforgiveness, remove the lies you tell yourself about them, remove anything that keeps you from loving those folks, and then forgive you and replace those places with Jesus-type-love.

And lastly, and maybe most importantly, I would ask you to remember, that we all would sit on the cloth of the unclean, but for the grace of God. We need thank God for his gracious Jesus-type-love that he has for each and everyone of us, the Jesus-type-love that he has for you.

Come now.

5th Sunday of Easter

April 28, 2013

Acts 11:1-18; John13: 31-35

I Won't Eat That...and I Won't Love That!