

18 May 2019

As I Have Loved You (John 13.12-35)

Easter 5

© Neil Millar

God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life. (Jn 3.16)

I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another.

It would be hard to pick which of these two verses is more famous. Interestingly, they're both on the same theme, John's preeminent theme, love. It's the second text I'm focussing on today, although, we cannot fully appreciate the command to *love one another* without alluding to the first text in which the nature and extent of love is described. There are different aspects of love --- filial or familial love, erotic and passionate love. The love referred to in both these texts is a kind of universal, non-discriminatory love, the Greek word is *agape*, it's the love God has for creation --- eternal, unflinching, unalterable (Williams 2016:73). According to Jesus, this *'mutually lived-out love of Christians for one another will be the single greatest missionary force in the world'* (Bruner 2012:796); *by this OR here is the way everyone will know that you are my disciples, that you have this kind of love for one another.*

Well, it sounds straightforward, but of course, we all know how it's not. *'Love one another and you will be happy'*, Leunig says, *'it's as simple and as difficult as that'*. Simple, difficult... and so necessary. *'What the world needs now, is love sweet love, it's the only thing that there's just too little of'*, says the old Burt Bacharach/Hal David song. *'What the world needs now is love sweet love, no not just for some but for everyone.'* Creation is crying out for love, people are converted by the experience

of love, and the church --- *Benedictus* --- is called to make it happen: 'I give you a new commandment', Jesus says (to his disciples),

that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also must love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love one for another.

I'm sure we all know this, we've heard it so many times before. And, we need to be reminded. In a world of complex and messy relationships unflinching love is difficult and we're often tempted to give up. But part of why it's so hard is because we came at it from the wrong starting point, trying to fulfil this command in a way that will never work. So today I'd like to get to the nub of what is Jesus really asking and expecting here?

First, a word about the Law and summaries of the Law. Jesus was a Jew, and a cornerstone of Judaism is the Law or Torah. The first five books of the Hebrew bible are referred to as the Book of the Law and as you know there are a lot of laws and regulations contained in its pages. The ten commandments are a kind of executive summary of all of this, they get to the heart of what the Law is all about. In the synoptic gospels, Jesus distilling it even further; down to just two commandments:

Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the great and first commandment [he says]. And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbour as yourself. (Mt 22)

The second of these *great* commandments is itself often summarised as 'the Golden Rule' -- 'Do to others as you would have them do to you.' (e.g. Mt 7.12; Lk 6.31). We can handle this, I think, it has a logic to it, but in John's gospel, Jesus takes it a step further and deeper. Here we get not just a distillation of Law, but a *new* commandment: *love one another as I have loved you*. I.e. Do to others, not *as you'd have them do to you*, but as I've done for you. It's different, deeper, more demanding than the Golden Rule because it replaces the notion of reciprocity, of self-interested back-scratching, with the commission to be as Christ to one another, to act as he

acts, consistently concerned for the wholeness and well-being of others. Washing feet, feeding the hungry, healing the sick, radical acts of kindness... it's a big call, and it's not just about good works, it's a whole whole-making way of being... as if the very energy of our presence makes new things possible for people.

This is why the place we start from matters. It's vital to note, and not entirely clear in our English translation of this commandment, that the power or capacity for the disciples' love for one another does *not* come from disciples themselves. It comes from the love of Christ for them, a love which precedes them, a love they're already experiencing. The Greek word *kathōs*, often translated 'as', has a *comparative* and *causative* sense to it. We get the comparative sense, that we're being commanded to love one another like OR in the same manner as Christ loves us, but we can miss the causative dimension of this way of being, which is that we love one another out of the love Christ has for us, from the experience of being loved. Another way to translate it would be: *Love one another from the resource of my love for you* OR *out of the well-spring of my love for you*.

To love one another consistently, generously, come what may, in our own strength is impossible; we're too fragile, too wounded, too needy for that; personal resources don't stretch that far, we can't do it by sheer will, and when we try our reserves quickly deplete - we burn out, become manipulative, get resentful, and exhausted. But that's not what Jesus is asking us to do. He's calling us to love others from the love we ourselves are receiving. The image is not of a finite reservoir but of an ever-replenishing *spring* --- a river that never runs dry. God's love flows continuously and abundantly *to us*, and *from* this refreshing, renewing well-spring we continuously love one another.

In other words, the key to keeping this command is not by gritting your teeth and trying really hard to love a whole bunch of people that test your patience and break your heart, the key is by keeping yourself fully in the stream of God's love and letting it *flow on* to others.

Which raises the question of how we do that? How do we remain within the stream of God's love, such that we ourselves are continually being reconciled and refreshed? This is where I want to unpack a bit more of the context for this commandment. Two things to note. First, the command comes immediately after Jesus has dismissed Judas from their midst. Some commentators suggest that the placement of the story about Judas between the washing of the disciple's feet and this teaching about a new commandment interrupts the natural flow of the passage. They suggest it may be a later editorial insertion.

But I find myself drawn to another suggestion (e.g. Johnson 2017:129), namely that John is offering important spiritual guidance here -- in order to remain in the flow of Christ's love you need to remove the obstacles that inhibit access, that block your surrender to that flow. Judas was and represents love's betrayal, and in a sense, there's a bit of Judas in all of us. Like him, we all desire to control the outcome and are tempted to take matters into our own hands, to withhold, not to give ourselves over whole-heartedly to loving and being loved. Maybe we think ourselves unworthy, maybe we're afraid or just proud... In his ordering of this chapter, John seems to be suggesting that it is not until the spirit of 'Judas' is dismissed that disciples can receive and live out this commandment to love one another. In other words, we need to renounce our refusals of love, the 'Judas' element of ourselves (and this is surely a continuing process). That's the first thing --- a practice really.

And a second practice is really the other side of the coin - from giving up withholding, to taking up abiding. This command to love one another is followed by Jesus' teaching on the coming of the helper (the Holy Spirit) and on the importance of abiding. '*Abide in me as I abide in you*', Jesus says to his disciples (15.4). And explicitly, '*Apart from me you can do nothing*' (15.6). If we are to love one another, as he has loved us, we must love from his life, his depths, his radical sourcing in the Father: '*As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love.*'

Now the question of what it means or how we abide is another whole sermon, suffice to say that it is of the essence of contemplative prayer to abide in Christ, and

for me, it's why time each day in silent contemplative prayer is vital in every sense of that word --- vital for my own healing and wellness, vital for keeping me in the stream of love that sustains me in the vocation of loving others. Contemplative prayer, silently sitting in the presence of God (of LOVE) being fully available to God (to LOVE) is a practice of abiding. And over time, below the level of our conscious awareness mostly, this deep slow action of love is reconciling and recreating us as lovers.

So, this new commandment is not setting us up for continuous failure or the continuous, exhausting exercise of willpower. It's about coming to dwell in --- rest and be nourished by --- our belovedness; about allowing God's love for us to overflow to others. By *this* they shall know that we are his disciples, that we love one another *even as* he loves us.

References

- Bruner FD (2012) *The Gospel of John: A Commentary*, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids.
- Johnson D (2017) *Jesus, Christ and Servant of God: Meditations on the Gospel According to John*, Inner Light Books, San Francisco.
- Williams, R (2016) *Being Disciples*, SPCK, London.