

Sermon Text: John 13:31-35

Holy Father, may the words of my mouth and the meditation of every heart be acceptable unto You, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

Sometimes when I go with a family to the hospital to be with them, and I'm there when the doctor comes out, very often a doctor or a surgeon will talk very quickly, and the family will nod their heads like this, and then the doctor looks at his or her beeper, and asks, "Any questions?" as they turn to leave. Only then, the family will turn to me and say, "What did they say? What was that?" So I try to listen very carefully. Sometimes people don't speak very clearly, but other times, we just don't listen very well.

An older woman, and I have a woman in this congregation who would fit the story, but I won't say, but an older woman with a mind of her own returned to her two-story home after major surgery. Among other things, the doctor instructed her not to go up and down the stairs until he saw her again. Well, a week later the doctor examined her, and told her, "Okay, now you can safely go up and down the stairs." The lady said, "Thank God! I was getting tired of climbing up and down that drainpipe!" Sometimes people don't listen very well.

The woman's response is similar to how many of us respond to Jesus' teachings, then and now. Think about it. Jesus told plainly the rich young ruler, you know the one, who asked the question, "What must I do to inherit eternal life?" and he named a few Commandments, and he was told by Jesus that he had it mostly right, but for you, to him, Jesus said, "You must go and sell what you have, and give your money to the poor." Apparently, his money was an idol. It stood in the way of his following Jesus, and Jesus gave that clear commandment of what to do. His question was what must I do to inherit eternal life. It's an important issue, but he sadly walked away. He couldn't do it. He wouldn't do it.

Another man, seeking to get right with God with as little effort as possible, was told to love his neighbor. He said fine, but first define for me exactly who my neighbor is and who my neighbor is not. To him Jesus told the Good Samaritan story.

We come to church, and we hear Jesus' commands, and we look for loopholes. In today's Gospel lesson, Jesus said, "I give you a new commandment." He said, "You must love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also must love one another. By this love," – three times He's said it so far, – "you have for one another, by this love, everybody who sees it will know that you are my disciples."

Now sermons in a lot of pulpits on a lot of Sundays, sometimes even the one that I am behind, are vague and they are thick with theological jargon, and there can be a reason for that. You feel like you're getting your money's worth because whatever the preacher said, it sounds erudite. It sounds well-researched, and because it is so complex and vague, you feel free to interpret it anyway you like or to ignore it completely. So everybody leaves happy, if not changed or challenged. It reminds me of that question that reporters ask when they run out of meaningful questions. You know the one. If you were stranded on a desert island, and you could take only two recordings of music or sometimes books, but music, what would it be? I've thought about

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that. For me, it would be the Beatle’s greatest hits because that reminds me of my childhood, and I would also take a collection of Miles Davis because I know I am supposed to be able to appreciate his jazz genius, and I try, and maybe with time on an island alone, I would finally get it. If someone wanted to take one sermon, if they did on a desert island, it might be this one, about this text.

It underlines the ancient teachings of the Ten Commandments. It really does. It’s not hard to understand. Half of the Commandments have to do with loving God. The other half has to do with loving your neighbor. It is not hard to understand.

The Apostle Paul in Romans explicitly and strongly said it in Romans 13. He said to owe no one anything except to love one another. For he who loves his neighbor has fulfilled the law. That’s a heavy statement. As a former rabbi, Paul was very interested in fulfilling the law, and he said he who loves his neighbor has fulfilled the law.

Forget memorization. Very few Americans, even church members, can name all the Ten Commandments anyway. That’s the basis of the law. Romans 13:9, the next verse, says, The Commandments, and he starts naming them, you shall not commit adultery. Kill, Not steal. Not covet. You know the rest. Paul says, and understand this, he said any other Commandment, all these are summed up in this sentence. You shall love your neighbor as yourself. Next verse, he says love does no wrong to a neighbor, therefore, and when a rabbi says therefore, he means equal sign, therefore love is fulfilling the law. He’s saying that’s what God intended from the very beginning for us to love God and to love each other, and Jesus added as we love ourselves.

If you’re going to take one idea, one sermon, and one Scripture text to a desert island, I hope this might be it. Jesus underlined the point in red. Jesus said not only does love fulfill the Commandments; it is the Commandment, a new Commandment I give to you that you love one another as I have loved you. Now here comes the theology. Exactly how did Jesus love us? What are we commanded to do?

It has nothing to do with feelings. It has absolutely nothing to do with feelings. Jesus commanded nothing about Valentine hearts and warm fuzzies. He commanded love as an assignment, as a mission, as a verb, as something you do whether you feel like it or not. Not in your spare time, but all the time even if it costs you something, and if it is love, as Jesus loved, you can be sure that it will cost you something. This is not the echo of familiar songs of love from your childhood that you may associate with simpler times and naïve sentiment. This is sort of associated with the jazz assignment of love among the chaos of life when you can’t always pick up the tune or the melody. Love for complex times often has no discernible melody, only a note that you recognize every now and then, but still you know it’s important and it’s love. It’s not friends or family or career advancement or politics or the economy that is ultimately moving toward some great theme. It’s not all of these things to which we pay more attention. It is love that is the great theme of our life, the great theme of Scripture. Love even amongst the chaos of our lives.

Love – just do it! Jesus commanded it. Paul said it fulfills all the Commandments we have forgotten or perhaps never knew. It is what God had in mind from the beginning. It is what I

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believe God will ask you about at the end. Do you love me? Do you understand you are forgiven and can love yourself? And final bonus question, did you fulfill my Commandment to love others? In the review of your life as it plays out, and the answer is obvious to God, it may become obvious to you. Did I love God? Did I love others? Did I understand that I was forgiven and can love myself?

This is the one sermon that I think we all should understand and take to heart. You have heard this story I'm about to tell before. I know that you've heard it. You've heard it from me. You're going to hear it again. One more. It's just so good. I think.

It's about a psychology professor, who had no children of his own, but whenever he saw a parent correcting their child or scolding their child for wrongdoing, he would say, “No friend, that's not the way to do it. You should love your boy. Don't punish him. You should love the girl. Don't punish her.” One hot summer afternoon, the professor was doing a little patching in the concrete in his driveway, and he was tired and he was sweaty after hours and hours of work, but he finally got it all evened out and all the marks gone. It was smooth. Just then, out of the corner of his eye, he saw a mischievous little eight-year-old boy putting his handprints in the fresh cement. Well, he rushed over there, and he grabbed the boy, and started shaking him and yelling at him. A neighbor leaned out the window, and said watch it professor, don't you remember? You must love that child. The professor yelled back, furiously, I do love him in the abstract, but not in the concrete!

You need not be a Bible scholar to understand that. All the law and all the prophets boil down to love God completely and love your neighbor as yourself. Love one another. Not abstractly! Not theoretically! But concretely, as a verb. It's the law and the prophets. It's all the Bible boiled down and distilled into an elixir that applies and heals every relationship, every heart, and it is necessary. Of Christians it is required, but how can I possibly love wholeheartedly God and my neighbor, and besides if you've lived long enough, you know that love hurts. Love is fraught with rejection and betrayal and danger. What kind of love did Jesus live? The kind that shows deep compassion and acts on it, does something about it, costs. It costs money. It costs time. It costs effort. It costs talent. It costs you your very life!

The deeper you love, the more often you will wince at the pain of others, turn away when they are embarrassed, cry for their loss and grief. God so loved the world that He felt the weight of our sin, our judgment on the Cross. What is the Cross if not the greatest love and the deepest empathy?

C. S. Lewis, I believe this is a Lewis quote, said it best. He said to love at all is to be vulnerable. Love anything and your heart will certainly be wrung and possibly broken. If you want to make sure of keeping it intact, you must give your heart to no one, not even an animal. Wrap it carefully round with hobbies and little luxuries, and avoid all entanglements. Lock it up, safe in the casket or coffin of your selfishness, but in that casket safe, dark, motionless and airless, it will change. It will not be broken. It will become unbreakable, impenetrable, and irredeemable. The only place outside of Heaven where you can be perfectly safe from all the dangers of love is Hell.

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You can avoid the pain of love. I’ve met many people through the years who’ve bragged, I cry for no one, I care for no one, I live for myself. I met a young man once, when I did prison ministry years ago, and he had right above each knuckle tattooed, “I walk alone.” I knew that he meant to appear tough and untouchable, but I also knew that I was looking at a coward. I was looking at a coward. Sometimes, we’re all that kind of coward.

Love is not naïve children’s songs and Valentines. Love is a Commandment for all who want to know God and know life as God intended and know who Jesus was. Love as Jesus loved is not natural. It is supernatural. It is possible only when we pray Lord, I don’t want to get involved. Lord, I want to pass by on the other side. Lord, I want to give up on them. Lord, call somebody else to do it, but if it be thy will, then You’re going to have to give me the strength to love this unlovely soul standing right in front of me because on my own, I don’t want to. That’s what I mean by supernatural. God has to help us love some people, perhaps truly love at all.

It’s amazing how many Christians have been in church all their lives, and they still miss the Gospel. So many folks still live in the Old Testament bound by legalisms and restricted by the Thou Shalt Nots, and they feel if I don’t do that and I don’t do that and I don’t do that, then I’m a Christian. What about the Thou Shalts? The Commandment. Jesus gave a new Commandment that you love one another even as I have loved you, that you also love one another and by this, all people shall know that you are my disciples if you love one another. This is our witness. This is the light that we are to shine in the darkness of this world. This is our calling. To love everybody, even our enemies. Nothing could be clearer from the Gospels than that. The Samaritans were hated in Jesus’ day, and Jesus made the Samaritan good in the story. To love everyone. The adulterers were stoned by Jewish law. Jesus rescued and forgave the woman caught in the act. Zacchaeus the crooked tax collector Jesus loved, went home with him, ate with him, forgave him. The repentant thief dying on the Cross He forgave. The ones who nailed Him on the Cross He forgave. He forgave Peter who denied Him three times, in fact, He made him leader of the apostles. Jesus’ love cut through all the chaos as the one consistent melody of this message. In all the human imperfection He encountered, He loved courageously and even unto death. No general hazy, goodwill sort of love, but specific down in the trenches, micro-managed kind of love.

Love whether you feel like it or not. Can you live; can you love like that on your own? No you can’t. Only God can love like that, and only people who have God’s promised spirit dwelling within can echo God’s love out to others, but I do think that we can impair and we can ignore God’s spirit, and ignore people around us, and we can hate in spite of everything that God has done for us. We can! We can! So love is ultimately a decision. A decision to ask God for the power to love and then actually do it. Do it! Are you running on empty? Are you sneering more than smiling at my message? I’ve been there.

Please take one thing away. You cannot give God’s love out of your heart unless you have God’s love in your heart. Ask for it! Bask in it! Then do unto others as Jesus has done unto you. Then hang on. Your life will change! Amen.