

Sermon: Be The Church

Scripture: John 13:31-35

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In some of the last words that Jesus says to his disciples, he cuts through all the religious laws and theological claims and biblical mandates and breaks it down plain and simple - “hey, this is how people will know that you are my disciples, by your love. Love one another as I have loved you.” That’s the litmus test, pure and simple, for being Jesus’ followers, for being Christian in this world and for being the church.

As you all come to be confirmed into the church, that’s the main take away that we hope you’ve gotten from our Confirmation year together: that God loves you, expressed that love through Jesus’ life, death and resurrection, and asks of you the same that Jesus gave, that you love one another. That’s what should mark us apart as the church. That’s how we all should be the church. That’s the calling for you in being the church in the world as you are confirmed.

It’s that simple, but as preachers tend to do, I’ve gotta say more and not just leave it at that, of course I do. Cause we in the church are big on saying love one another, love your neighbor as yourself, even love your enemy and light, I’m afraid, on how in the world you actually do that.

Cause it is not a sentimental love that Jesus is referring to. In fact he says at one point - I’m not talking about loving those who love you and doing good to those who do good to you, even the tax collectors and other bad people do that.” And instead what he asks is that we make the love force the guiding force of our lives and especially in instances where love is

evidently absent and least present, where hatred and violence, vengeance and anger, greed and exclusion are ruining people and their communities, then in particular I want people to see that you are my people by the way you love, Jesus says. The ole Christian camp song that I grew up with got it right - “they’ll know we are Christians by our love, by our love, yes, they’ll know we are Christians by our love”.

So how do we love in the way Jesus asks us to love and in that way BE the church in the world, well, first we take note of instances where we aren’t “feelin’ the love” and we opt as best as we can to determine what is the loving response in that given instance. Another good Christian motto from way back in the 1900’s when many of us were born hardly gets better and that is WWJD - what would Jesus do? It’s a really good question actually, especially in instances where we’re not feelin’ the love or the people around us aren’t, that we stop for a moment and ask what would Jesus do in this instance? It can be hugely informative. And of course sometimes situations are complicated and it’s really not that clear what Jesus would do in a given instance, but other times it’s a great moral guideline cause it is crystal clear whether what we just did or want to do is what Jesus would do. Ok, would Jesus shun and shame this person? Nope. How then must I love them in this particular instance? How do I see them as a child of God and how can my actions and responses reflect that reality? It’s not about being sentimental, what Jesus asks of us. It’s fierce, fiery, even harrowing at times, to love one another, but that’s following Jesus, that’s being the church.

Early on in Confirmation Class this year we talked about how you can’t necessarily prove that there is a God but you also can’t prove there isn’t a God either and we thought about God in relation to love, that we’d all

agree that love exists in this world but proving it is another question. And yet Jesus offers us a pathway toward proving the existence of love and it really cuts to the heart of what the gospel, the good news is all about.

If you want to show someone how much you love them what would be the best way to make it extremely clear how great that love is? It would be to give your life for them right? You would take a bullet to spare them from it. You would shove them from the train tracks even if it meant getting hit yourself. And in the aftermath the saved person is like “oh wow, they really loved me.” And that’s it. That’s the heart of the Gospel. Jesus goes to his death and offers himself up for the sake of the world that God so loved and everyone who sees this, hears of it, experiences it with an open heart says - “oh wow, you really do love us!” The way Jesus says it in the gospel of John is - “there is no greater love than this: to lay down one’s life for one’s friends... and you are my friends. And we remember Jesus draws a very very wide net for “his friends”.

Now usually, hopefully, we’re not going to have such dramatic instances to show our love for our wide net of friends, but what this ancient teaching of Jesus’ arises out of is this strange-even-today and challenging notion that there is a more important thing than even our own lives, than our self-preservation, that there is a more important thing than our own enrichment, that there is a more important thing than what is good for me and my own, and the more important thing is what is best for the common good, for the wider setting in which I find myself. Jesus’ passion and death proclaims that there is a high good, a Higher Power, to whom we are accountable and for whom we can give our lives. There are lesser examples of this that aren’t quite so final and exacting as the sacrifice of our life itself but that we are still called to as Christians and that is any of

the myriad of small ways we might sacrifice what we want and even our own good for the higher good. It's not something that the marketing world in this country believes exists, this notion of a higher good than what we can buy and get for ourselves.

While all the culture around us is telling us to get as much as we can whenever we can for as long as we can, loving others means taking less than we can for the sake of others who will get less because of our taking all we can. This is a profoundly difficult lesson for us in the first world or the global north to accept, that our wealth doesn't simply come from our hard work and our being blessed above others, but our wealth comes at the expense of 3rd and 4th world countries or mostly the countries of the global south. And what we take for our life-styles is at their expense. And what we are taking comes at the expense of the earth. I think you all know this better than we adults do and so it makes me think that you can be the church better than we have been the church in this way, that you're likely going to be more willing than we have been to sacrifice your wants for the greater good around you. That's loving the world. That's being the church. Greater love has nothing other than this, to willingly, intentionally, lay down our lives, our own wants, even our own needs at times for the greater good.

While this can sound hard and exacting, there's also something really important to note about what comes along with this love-force that God has built into this world and it arrives in the scriptures in the form or image of a dove. The dove is the symbol of the Holy Spirit, the third part of the Holy Trinity that is the One God which is in Christianity the primary image that accompanies baptism and *confirming* baptism. The dove is what accompanies the love force in this world and the love force brings peace, peace to the soul, peace to relationships, peace to the world... and in a

world of frayed nerves and strained relations and edgy tensions, peace is an immense GIFT!

Cause the loving way of Jesus might be a way that is hard and asks a lot of us but it is a way that brings peace. At the extreme following Jesus might bring death, but peace is promised even there. And in less extremes following Jesus requires us to do things that are for the good of others even when they're not necessarily the best thing for us but what is known in those moments of opting for the greater good is that in aligning ourselves with the love force, we are granted the Holy Spirit of peace that settles our souls, quiets our anxieties, brings peace because what we are doing is right and good and aligned with the way God means the world to be.

And s that is our hope and prayer for you about to be confirmed today, that the peace of Christ, brought by his Holy Spirit will accompany you in your effort to follow the way of Jesus, to tred the path of God, to be the church in this world, that there is a good that transcends all the goods that this culture might offer you...and we pray you see it and go forward with that greater good. That's why it's so important that you keep tied in on some level or another to the church, to the ancient and beautiful scriptures, to the Spirit of Christ in this world because it is a spirit of love and goodness and truth that brings peace and counters the false promises of peace that come from what is less than love in this world. Remember, you are not your own, God formed you and called you into being. Remember you are not your own and God calls you towards the greater good in this world. Remember as you are confirmed this morning that love is the greatest force in this world and it is where your peace and joy will be found. Remembering that, let's get to business and confirm you all!