

A New Commandment  
John 13:31-35  
Fifth Sunday of Easter, Year C May 18, 2025  
Choptank Charge Pastor Nan Duerling

Good morning, friends, and welcome to worship. We're glad to see all of you.

Last week, we looked at Jesus' comments about his sheep knowing his voice, found in John 10. Today we are moving ahead several chapters to explore verses 31-35 of John 13. We need to set the stage for this brief reading because, chronologically, it comes on Holy Thursday, which we marked weeks ago. The disciples have gathered with Jesus, who washed their feet as a token of his love for them. In verses 21-30 he foretells his betrayal, which we, the readers, know is just hours away.

As today's Scripture opens, we learn that "he" had gone out into the night. We need to pause here and recognize that the pronoun "he" refers to Judas. He has left the group and gone to do his unthinkable dirty work. In the dark of night, we can sense the darkness of the evil that is about to unfold. The disciples think Jesus has sent his treasurer on an errand to get supplies for the Passover (13:29). They have no idea of the events that have been planned and now will begin to play out.

Jesus obviously knows what Judas is up to, but he makes no mention of it. Instead, he speaks about his imminent glorification. God, too, will be glorified as a result of Jesus' crucifixion, resurrection, and ascension.

Verses 34-35 are the heart of today's reading, at least for me. Jesus speaks here of a "new commandment, that you love one another." But wait, how can loving one another be a new commandment? All three Synoptic Gospels record Jesus telling his listeners that the greatest commandment is to love God and to love neighbor as oneself (Matthew 24:36-40; Mark 12:28-31; Luke 10:27). And Jesus didn't pull these commandments out of a hat. He was quoting Deuteronomy 6:4 and Leviticus 19:18. Clearly, the commandment to love is ancient, having been practiced among the Israelites from their earliest days as a people.

So, what's new here in John? Jesus connected the commandment to love one another to their relationship with him. They are to love each other just as Jesus himself has loved them. By the love they show for one another, others will know that they are his disciples. Renowned scholar of the Gospel of John, the late Gail R. O'Day, explains the newness this way (*The New Interpreter's Bible*, Vol. IX, 732-733):

[W]hat is new is that the commandment to love derives from the incarnation...Jesus' "own" are asked to enter into the love that marks the relationship of God and Jesus. Their participation in this relationship will be evidenced the same way that Jesus' is: by acts of love that join the believer to God...Keeping this commandment is the identifying mark of discipleship (v. 35), because it is the tangible sign of the disciples abiding in Jesus (15:10).

We can find many illustrations of people living out the love of Jesus. This amazing account was related by Christian minister and author Max Lucado, who wrote:

When Catherine Lawes' husband, Lewis, became the warden on Sing Sing prison in 1921, she was a young mother of three daughters. Everybody warned her never to step foot inside the walls. But she didn't listen to them. When the first prison basketball game was held, in she went, three girls in tow, and took a seat in

the bleachers with the inmates .

When she heard that one convicted murderer was blind, she taught him Braille so he could read. Upon learning of inmates who were hearing impaired, she studied sign language so they could communicate. For sixteen years Catherine Lawes softened the hard hearts of the men of Sing Sing.

The prisoners knew something was wrong when Lewis Lawes didn't report to work. Quickly the word spread that Catherine had been killed in a car accident. The following day as the acting warden took his early morning walk, he noticed a large gathering at the main gate. Every prisoner pressed against the fence. Eyes awash with tears. Faces solemn. No one spoke or moved.

The warden made a remarkable decision. "All right, men, you can go. Just be sure to check in tonight." These were America's hardest criminals. But the warden unlocked the gate for them, and they walked without escort or guard to the home of Catherine Lawes to pay their last respects. And each one returned.

Real love changes people. That's genuine love. That's true love.

Although her story has apparently been included in many sermons, Mrs. Lawes' deeds were not just a preacher's tale but the true story of a woman who the inmates referred to as Mother. For some inmates as young as 10, her affection was the only motherly love they had ever known. In doing a bit of fact-checking, I also learned that she made sure every inmate received a Christmas present. She also helped them to write letters to their families. This remarkable woman helped those on death row to feel more comfortable in their cells. She housed their families as the date of execution drew near. She arranged for any prisoner who had no family to receive a respectful burial. While I could find no reference to her religious affiliation, it seems clear to me that this saint not only spoke about love but enacted the love of Jesus behind the walls of one of the world's most notorious prisons.

Catherine's love-filled life makes me think of the hymn, "What Wondrous Love Is This" (UMH #292), which refers to Jesus' love for us that prompted him to give away his life by dying on the cross. It also brings to mind a popular hymn from the 1960s: "They'll Know We Are Christians by Our Love" (*The Faith We Sing*, #2223). And there are many, many more hymns that remind us that the hallmark of being a Christian is clearly evident in how we love each other.

So, now for the tough question: What does Christ's love look like in our lives? How are we demonstrating to others that we embody his love within ourselves? Perhaps we need to recognize that "God is love," as First John 4:8 tells us. Love describes God's nature. John goes on to write: "Those who say, 'I love God,' and hate their brothers or sisters, are liars; for those who do not love a brother or sister whom they have seen, cannot love God whom they have not seen" (4:20). Moreover, as we read in First Corinthians 13:8, "love never ends." Love is at the core of our being because love shows forth God's will and God's very self.

But how are we expressing God's love so that others can experience it? It's not enough, as James reminds us in his letter, to tell someone in need of food or clothing, "'Go in peace; keep warm and eat your fill,' and yet you do not supply their bodily needs, what is the good of that? So faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead" (3:16-17). Providing basic necessities is a good place to start. And you don't have to be a billionaire to do this. Sometimes a few dollars to enable someone to purchase a sandwich or cup of coffee will at least ease their hunger for a

time and give them a bit of hope. We also have to advocate for change.

Christ-like love, however, moves beyond the basics, beyond the few dollars that most of us have to help someone in need. Christ's love requires some sacrifice on our part: perhaps sacrifice of our time, talent, and/or treasure. Are you willing to give of yourself and your time to visit someone who is lonely or ill? Can you use your talents to help a non-profit fulfill its mission? Members of our congregations have been—and are—contributing to the mission work of Overflow Café. Heather Love-Barbour of Antioch and Mary Benjamin of Spedden are both spending volunteer time to help the Café run smoothly. I hope others will be able to join them in this important mission.

We are also very grateful to the Antioch food service team, spearheaded by Becky Wilson, and including Edwina Sipler, Shelly Willey, Opie Marshall, Gayla Thomas, Fran Brannock, Jackie Hyser, Donna McConnell, and Frannie Malley. They provide a meal each month at the community shelter. They have been offering this service of love since long before I arrived. Recently, they have been asked to provide not only dinner but also breakfast for the next morning, which they have done. The team has dates lined up into September.

In addition to these volunteer activities, some of you work each day in a facility where people who have various needs come for help. Barbara Barnes and Chris Condon share their love with the older adults at Pleasant Day. Betsy Spedden Ewing helps our neighbors through the Department of Social Services, as did Barbara Windsor until her recent retirement. You may receive loving medical care from Mary Benjamin or Ann Robinson at the Dorchester ER; or Pat McDonald at Mallard Bay; or private caregiver Freddie Condon. My apologies to anyone I've omitted. Please let me know so we can recognize your ministry.

And, of course, many of you are quietly helping family, friends, and neighbors who need assistance with shopping, medical transport, yard work or a host of other daily activities that for one reason or another they are not able to perform on their own. A special shout-out to Bob Sellers of Antioch who is often transporting a social services client somewhere. Anyone who reaches out in love in the name of Jesus is letting his light shine through them.

Apropos our discussion of embodying Jesus' love, I want to share with you a new vision statement for The United Methodist Church that was just released by the Council of Bishops with the Connectional Table on May 9<sup>th</sup>. Council President, Bishop Tracy Smith Malone, refers to this as a "catalyst for transformation." As such, I think we would do well to read and mark it and see how we as individuals and as congregations can live into this vision.

The new vision states: The United Methodist Church forms disciples of Jesus Christ, who empowered by the Holy Spirit, love boldly, serve joyfully, and lead courageously in local communities and worldwide connections.

The vision encourages United Methodists to embody the following principles:

- **Love Boldly:** Passionately love God and, like Jesus, embrace and include people of every age, nation, race, gender and walk of life. (Inspired by Matthew 22:37-39 and John 13:34-35)

- **Serve Joyfully:** With a Christ-like heart, journey alongside the most vulnerable, offering care and compassion with joy. (Inspired by Psalm 100:1, Nehemiah 8:10, John 13:14-15 and 1 Peter 4:10)

- **Lead Courageously:** Follow Jesus' example by resisting and dismantling all systems of evil, injustice, and oppression, striving for peace, justice and

reconciliation. (Inspired by Joshua 1:9 and Ephesians 6:10)

As we as a Charge live into this vision, we will be better able to more faithfully fulfill our denomination's longstanding mission statement, inspired by Matthew 28:1-20: "to make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world."

Friends, according to Jesus, and repeated in a well-known song, "what the world needs now is love." People I know are tired of chaos; tired of culture wars; tired of mean-spiritedness; tired of wars and rumors of more wars; tired of people not having enough financial wherewithal to obtain basic necessities for their families, including food, clothing, shelter, and medical care; and tired of politics that divide rather than unite. As a Christian, I was thrilled to hear the new Roman Catholic Pope, Leo IV, refer to building bridges to bring people together. That's exactly what Jesus tried to do. And that's exactly what anyone and everyone who professes the name of Jesus needs to do. Jesus certainly never engaged in partisan politics, trying to divide and conquer people. He forgave enemies, rather than taking revenge against them. He didn't even go after the oppressive Roman government. No, what he did was teach and live a new way, God's way, the kingdom way, the way of love.

The way of love, which Jesus commands us, is how we are to live. In our day, loving others as Jesus did, is going to require real holy boldness. How will you respond? What can our congregations do to let all people know that God loves them? By reaching out in love, my fervent prayer is that we will draw others into the ever-widening circle of God's love. Perhaps they will want to join one of our churches, but even if they don't, we will know that we have helped them along in their faith journey. Let's see what we can do together!

Love, Nan