**Three Meditations: John 13:31-34; 1 Corinthians 13:1-8; Acts 13:44-52** May 12, 2019

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*John 13:31When [Judas] was gone, Jesus said, “Now is the Son of Man glorified and God is glorified in him. 32If God is glorified in him, God will glorify the Son in himself, and will glorify him at once.*

*33“My children, I will be with you only a little longer. You will look for me, and just as I told the Jews, so I tell you now: Where I am going, you cannot come. 34“A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. 35By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another.”*

**Love: Christ’s New Command**

Before we get to today’s first message, we need to understand when this reading happened. Jesus was having his last teaching session with his disciples on the night before his death. In his final teaching and prayer session Jesus wants to impart the most important things for after his departure. Our reading is the keynote, the foundation for the rest. The foundation is this: ***“My children, I will be with you a little longer… [so] a new command I give you: Love one another.”***

Now, this command does not sound very new. It sounds almost exactly like a very, very well-known Old Testament passage. The Old Testament counterpart is so popular that even most non-Christians know it! This passage appears not once or twice, but nine times in the Bible! I am not saying this is the most important Bible passage in this book. But my guess is that across the general population it is the best known word of God there is. It says, *“Love your neighbor as yourself.”* By comparison, Jesus’ “new command” is ***“Love one another.”*** They sound a lot alike, don’t they?

*“Love your neighbor as yourself,”* is like a ruler. Sometimes it’s even called The Golden Rule. That Golden Rule measures us up, like a tailor’s tape measuring us for new clothing. *“Love your neighbor as yourself.”* After someone quoted the Golden Rule to Jesus, he said, *“Do this and you shall live.”* (Luke 10:28)

The Golden Rule. Do it and you have heaven. Do it and you will walk streets of gold. You will get the golden crown (Rev. 4:4). Just measure up.

Except that there is no one who measures up to that. No one. No one measures up to the perfect and flawless Golden Ruler that God uses to judge the inhabitants of the earth. No one is as concerned about others as they should be. Not the people on the street or the people in the pew. Not even, dare I say it, your mother!

The Golden Rule measures us up more like the height chart you see in mug shot backgrounds. God’s rule is golden. It is pure, accurate, and if you could do it, His Golden Rule would give you life. But we can’t. All we measure is how far we fall short of God’s Law.

Then what are we to think of our reading where Jesus tells us: ***“A new command I give you: Love one another?”*** It sounds like just another rule destining us for destruction.

If we think that following the Golden Rule makes us Christians, then we are in trouble, because it doesn’t. What makes us Christian is Jesus Christ coming to this earth, humbling himself and being humiliated, suffering and dying for our sins, rising for our resurrection, and the Holy Spirit planting in our hearts, a faith that Jesus is our Savior. It is an operation performed by God on all-but-dead patients. And like anesthetized patients in surgery, we have nothing to contribute to the life-giving procedure. We simply wake up, thankful that the surgeon has completed the job and given us new life. In God’s eyes, that’s what makes us Christians.

Jesus was talking to people who were already Christians when he said, ***“A new command I give you: Love one another just as I have loved you.”*** Their love was a result of their faith, not a cause of their faith. (The NIV punctuation in this verse is wrong, and misleading. Confer the Greek and 15:12 [NIV & Gr] for a parallel verse and correct punctuation.)

When Jesus says, ***“Love as I have loved you”*** he is telling us something different from the old Golden Rule. The old rule said, *“Love your neighbor as yourself”* measures by what I think or feel. ***“Love as I have loved you”*** measures by what Jesus has done. My inspiration is not to win an unwinnable game, but simply to live in thanks for what Christ has won.

Sometimes people say that the Christian church is full of hypocrites. I have heard Christians agree, and I’ve even heard pastors say it.) Are we?

Imagine going to an addiction recovery meeting. If you have never been to one of those… at a certain point in those meetings each person has a chance to share their addiction struggles. One woman stands up and rails against alcohol, about the evil it is—but everyone in the room knows that she still drinks. They can smell it on her breath! She is just doing this to fulfill a court order. Another woman stands up and rails against addiction, about the evil it is, and then admits that in the past week he has twice failed, and she asks for people’s prayers, because she is desperate to live a new life. Which one is a hypocrite? More important question: Which one is not a hypocrite?

Jesus’ command, ***“Love as I have loved you”*** frees us from the accusation of being a church full of hypocrites. We are only hypocrites if we believe that good behavior gets us into heaven; that we save ourselves. But if we believe that Jesus came to earth to save sinners, of whom I am the worst, then we are no hypocrites. We are people who humbly admit what we are.

“My name is Peter Martin, I am a sinner, saved by the blood of Jesus. I try to love my precious Savior, not to get to heaven, but because he has given me heaven.”

***“A new command I give you: Love one another as I have loved you.”*** Amen.

**Love: Whose Definition Are You Going to Use?**

*1 Corinthians 13:1If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am only a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal. 2If I have the gift of prophecy and can fathom all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have a faith that can move mountains, but have not love, I am nothing. 3If I give all I possess to the poor and surrender my body to the flames, but have not love, I gain nothing.*

There you have it. Just like Jesus said in John chapter 13, we also read here in 1 Corinthians 13. A Christian has love, or you are no Christian.

So let’s talk about that. What is love?

It depends on who gets to define love.

Here’s a memory from my past: We were driving down the road to the grinding mill. We had to grind the corn, called “maize” over there, for a big church gathering. In the pickup we had a few 110 pound bags of maize that needed to be ground into flour. The maize flour would later be cooked into the local staple called *nsima*. Now over there, maize was always measured by “buckets,” more or less a five gallon bucket. Each bag of maize contained three buckets of maize. I knew it. The men with me knew it. A standard bag always had three buckets of maize. When the miller, who got paid by the bucket, when he measured the maize, he said each bag had four buckets. We protested. Then he showed us his measuring bucket. Ahhh! After grinding the maize, as we drove away, the men with me complained bitterly that it was the smallest measuring bucket they had ever seen!

It doesn’t matter how much maize you have. It matters who gets to measure the maize you have.

In the last reading Jesus said, *“A new command I give you: Love one another as I have loved you.”* “Love one another” is something that nearly every single person on the earth would agree to. “Yes, let us love one another. This broken world needs more love!”

On this second Sunday of May, of all days, we agree with that! What would a life be like which has never known the love of a mother? (Some people can tell you, which should make those with this blessing the more thankful.) If there were hands there to receive and cuddle you the moment you entered this world… if there was a mother in your childhood who knew when to give you a hug and when to send you to your room… outside of faith in Jesus Christ, you could not have had a bigger gift in this life.

We might even think of mother-love as the very definition of love—which might just get as close to God’s definition as we can in this world. But every mother, at least every Christian mother, will admit that they have not been a perfect mother. There have been moments of selfishness, of wanting to give up, of excess anger, not to mention lapses in behavior. But even those moments give the mother an opportunity to teach that she too is saved by Jesus, and she loves him for that very reason.

Jesus said, “Love one another.” We all agree. But what does that mean?

Just as much as it matters who measures the maize you want to grind into flour, it matters who gets to define “love.”

For many of us, a definition “love” thrown at us most often by the music we listen to. Pop songs sing of “love” and little else for hours on end. But if Billboard’s Hot 100 is what defines “love” in our world, then we have a problem. Compare the lyrics of the latest chart toppers with God’s word. You will find that the pop world doesn’t know that there is a difference between “lust” and “love”. There could hardly be two more opposite things!

What the world defines as “love” is essentially sexual in nature, which is not what Biblical love means. It is also essentially selfish. And it is pretty much unconcerned about commitment. It is sin on at least three levels. The definition of love being blasted into your ears through most of adolescence and beyond is actually the definition of what the Bible calls “lust.” *And* it is terribly addictive and destructive toward other relationships. I’m not telling you to never listen to popular music. But if you let popular culture define “love” for you, you have lost much, and will have much to repent of.

Another misunderstanding of “love” is when it gets confused for “like.” I love chocolate chip ice cream. I love that song. I love my dog. Which is ok. We just need to be sure we understand. Think about it. This kind of “love” actually means “like.” I “love” these things because they please me in some way. This isn’t essentially selfish, but it is based on me and what I like. Which can be ok because much of the good we choose to do, and the people we choose to befriend and hang around with, and even whom we choose to marry isn’t based on “love” but “like.”

If you want to fill this world with God’s “love,” as in when Jesus says, *“Love one another,”* then you have to let God define love. When Christ Jesus said, *“Love one another”* he defines it by adding *“as I have loved you.”* Jesus defined love this way: appealing to those who hated him, mourning for those who rejected him, and praying for those who crucified him. He knew that millions would and still do take his blood-bought gift of salvation and throw it in the sewer. But he did it anyway. This love isn’t a feeling. Feelings, at best, are only the shiny wrapping paper around Biblical love. Biblical, God-defined love, is an undying commitment, based on an oath, a bond.

Or let’s skip all the pastor talk and just do what I told you we should do. Let’s let God define love…

*4Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. 5It is not rude, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. 6Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. 7It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres. 8Love never fails.”* Amen.

*Acts 13:44On the next Sabbath almost the whole city gathered to hear the word of the Lord. 45When the Jews saw the crowds, they were filled with jealousy and talked abusively against what Paul was saying. 46Then Paul and Barnabas answered them boldly: “We had to speak the word of God to you first. Since you reject it and do not consider yourselves worthy of eternal life, we now turn to the Gentiles. 47For this is what the Lord has commanded us: ‘I have made you a light for the Gentiles, that you may bring salvation to the ends of the earth.’ ” 48When the Gentiles heard this, they were glad and honored the word of the Lord; and all who were appointed for eternal life believed.*

*49The word of the Lord spread through the whole region. 50But the Jews incited the God-fearing women of high standing and the leading men of the city. They stirred up persecution against Paul and Barnabas, and expelled them from their region. 51So they shook the dust from their feet in protest against them and went to Iconium. 52And the disciples were filled with joy and with the Holy Spirit.*

**Love: …And the Greatest to Show Love**

From hundreds of miles they came. They drove, they flew. They came to the wedding to celebrate the couple’s new life together. Some came and stayed a few days. Others, in their busy schedules, could only eke out a few hours and then turned around again on the same day. Both in their own way, in much time generously spent, and in short time carefully carved out, both showed their love for those young adults. Sometimes it is said that love is spelled “T-I-M-E”.

In our ever more frantically busy lives, it is more true than ever. How amazing when someone sets aside time, not for a tweet, but for a card and a letter. How exciting when a friend on busy travels, sets aside a few hours for a visit, even thirty minutes for a lunch. They made time for you! You know that they must love you!

What we see in our reading is a very strong example of love. Granted, the word “love” is not mentioned in this reading. (In fact, it doesn’t appear in the entire book of Acts!) Here, love is not expressed in the usual way: food handed to the hungry or money to the impoverished. We see people who show love in a way not appreciated by the world. In fact, the world usually kicks this kind of love to the curb: “Well, that is fine to talk about Jesus. But we need people who are really concerned about making a difference. Bettering people’s lives. Not just this religious stuff.”

I fall for Satan’s argument all the time. People say things like that, and I fall for it! I feel guilty that I don’t give nearly as much to physical needs. I start to make excuses for our church that pays a pretty penny for the mortgage on this worship space, but only has a modest food pantry and a once a year volunteer outing to Feeding America (not an actual day, just a morning.) I get defensive.

We forget that the “love” that the disciples were showing in our reading was the greatest love possible. They were doing more good than billions of dollars given to the eradication of malaria. Spiritual and/or physical charity should not be an either/or proposition. We should be doing both. But *“What good is it for a man to gain the whole world, yet forfeit his soul?”*  Or let me ask it another way, *“What good is it if you eliminate poverty but all those rich people go to hell?”* You have helped them. Yes. For a few years.

If you get the warm fuzzies because you help someone get a step up on life but never address deeper spiritual issues, what kind of love is that? You are giving the stuff that other people want and make you feel good. But you are afraid to give them the stuff that might cost you something, disapproval, an angry telling-off. Look, I know that it is difficult to take that kind of rejection on the chin. But do we *really* care? Really? If we aren’t going to mention the most important thing of all just because somebody might say something mean?

That is why I say, in our reading, we the truest display of Christian love. A couple men had come from hundreds of miles away. They didn’t fly or drive in to that city called Antioch. They walked in. It took not hours but months of their time, to get their message of salvation to these people in this place. If you spell love, “T-I-M-E” Paul and Barnabas surely loved these people. They had a commitment to them like we heard about in our last reading, to pick just a few words: *“Love is patient, love is kind… it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered… It always hopes, always perseveres.”*

Paul and Barnabas loved these people so much that they spoke the message of Jesus. And when their audience was ***“filled with jealousy and talked abusively against what Paul was saying,”*** they didn’t change their message. They continued to hold out the word of life. Granted, they did turn away from the rejecting crowds and toward those who would listen. ***“When the Gentiles heard this, they were glad and honored the word of the Lord; and all who were appointed for eternal life believed.”***

Remember Paul, Barnabas and Antioch in our time ever more intolerant of the Christian message. May God let us not be bullied into silence by the disapproving world. Let us be more concerned and loving for their lives than they are disapproving of God’s message of our sin and his Savior!

And then it happened. Those who had rejected God’s message were not content to not hear it, they didn’t want anyone hearing it! ***“They stirred up persecution against Paul and Barnabas, and expelled them from their region.”*** What spiteful, hateful people!

What would you do if fired on a completely baseless accusation? What would you do if you got kicked out of university for being a practicing Christian? What would you do if you got a life-time ban from a social media platform for talking about your Savior?

Did you hear the last verse of our reading? ***“And the disciples were filled with joy and the Holy Spirit,”*** not because they were rejected, but because *some* had believed. All that for a few. How they must have loved those people in Antioch!

What about us and the people in Radcliff? Amen.