

Easter 5, Year C
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John 13:31-35
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John's gospel is structured differently than the others. Where in Matthew, Mark and Luke the last supper Jesus has with his disciples occupies part of one chapter, in John it consumes nearly a third of the whole book, and contains many of the most significant things Jesus has to say. Our passage for today comes from that part of the gospel, and though the "new commandment" Jesus gives has over the years been honored far more in the breach than in the observance, it is nevertheless among the most important things John has to tell us about his understanding of the larger implications of the Good News, and how we are to live it out. This morning I want to focus on two aspects of that commandment. First I want to think about what it tells us about how we are to identify ourselves to the world, and how the world is to identify us. Second, I want to reflect a moment upon what this says about the nature of true service to God, and what perhaps we might be considering as we imagine our life with God.

When we consider what makes us Christians, part of the Body of Christ, followers of Jesus, whatever you want to call it, from an institutional point of view the focus is inevitably on baptism. Baptism is what makes us Christians.

Beyond that, the question of whether or not we are followers of Jesus usually revolves around what we believe, especially what we believe about Jesus. When people have told me from time to time that I am most certainly not a Christian – and I have been told that more than once – those declaring this about me have always been referring to the content of my ideas about God and Jesus, never about whether I have been baptized, and hardly ever about the disposition of my soul toward other people. Similarly, when people have assured me that I am a Christian, a true follower of Jesus, it has always been because of the content of my ideas about God and Jesus, never about whether I have been baptized, and almost never about the disposition of my soul towards others. Though from time to time people do condemn certain behavior, and even laws, as unchristian, behavior and perspective is far less often identified as the indicator of who is following Jesus than doctrinal conformity or participation in baptismal rites.

Notice what has happened in this passage; that whole method of assessment has been turned on its head. What John is telling us is that neither participation in proper ritual nor adherence to proper doctrine are the chief means of determining who is a disciple of Jesus and who not. What really matters is whether or not those who claim the name of Jesus as their hope and inspiration in life are showing the kind of love toward each other as Jesus showed toward them. In this St. John is consistent with St. Matthew, whose

story of the separation of sheep from goats declares that entrance into the kingdom hinges not upon whether or not people have the right ideas, or the proper ritual observance, but upon what how they act toward the powerless, as Jesus tells his listeners “whatsoever you do to the least of these my brothers and sisters, that you do unto me.” Insofar as both of those stories from clearly different sources make pretty much the same point, we may at least hope, and perhaps even suppose, that this remarkable notion goes back to Jesus himself.

When therefore we ask ourselves what is it that we must do to proclaim the gospel in its fullest and truest sense, the answer that comes to us is at once harder and easier than we had imagined. It is easier because one thing we don't have to do is spend any time trying to figure out who is in and who is out on the basis of what they believe. It is harder because what we are called to do is to live for each other, to forbear, to forgive, to sacrifice for each other's sake. I am not called to sit in judgment upon those whose ideas about Jesus or the interpretation of the bible differ in some meaningful way from mine. I am called to love those whose ideas about Jesus and interpretation of the bible differ in some meaningful way from mine. By love John does not mean an emotion. By love John means a disposition of the soul that leads a person to live for another, and to give oneself away for the sake of the other. This is why the author of 1 John can assure us that “those who say 'I love God' and hate their brothers or sisters are untruthful (he uses 'liars') for those who do not

love a brother or sister whom they have seen, cannot love God whom they have not seen.”

So this is the first point about this important statement. John is not saying that doctrine and ritual are meaningless. In fact I believe from other parts of the gospel that John thought both doctrine and ritual mattered. He is saying that these things do not make real and present the reality and power of the risen Christ. These things do not show the world who God truly is and how God truly works. It is love for one another that does that. The world sees the presence and power of the risen Christ in us when we, through our love for one another, make real and present the love God has for us.

The second point I want to consider is what this “new commandment” that we love one another says about the nature of true service to God and the motives for such for service. Two of the principle reasons for worshipping God, both then and now, were first to gain protection either from the ills of the world, or the wrath of an angry deity, and second to persuade God to give the faithful what they truly wanted. In this single commandment of love Jesus obliterates both those reasons for worship, and redefines what service means. We are not called to worship God in order either to get what we want or escape retribution. Rather, we are called to see that true worship is love for one another, and true worship is true service. What God wants from us is nothing more than that we love, and the will of God is to transform this world

through the power of that love. The wrath of God is therefore not some punishment imposed upon the world from without. The wrath of God is a world without love, and without the compassion and justice that true love inevitably elicits from us. The wrath of God is a world so mistrusting of itself that people compete to see who can develop, and then monopolize, nuclear weapons. The wrath of God is a world so preoccupied with security and power that not only tolerates, but encourages inequalities that have over time become quite staggering. On a more personal level the wrath of God is that sense of isolation and bitterness in which people find themselves living when they cannot forgive, cannot forbear. These are but a few of the consequences of what happens when we live without love, and we could name many others, for the wrath of God is not what some transcendent power will do to us if we don't behave. That wrath is what we are forced to live with when we do not love as we have been loved, when, that is, we abandon that new commandment Jesus has given us, that we love one another as we have been loved.

Thus, with this new commandment the purpose of religion shifts. God is no longer a tool to be used either to protect ourselves or control our environment, and our true lives are no longer defined and limited by our ability to protect ourselves and control the world. We are defined instead by a new standard, we are circumscribed only by our capacity to reflect the love of God to each other, and so become part of the means by which God continues

to transform the world. This is why Paul can insist that there is nothing in heaven or on earth that can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus. Life and death are no longer the ultimate arbiters of meaning and purpose, and not because there is some existence after this one, but because what matters is not our mortality, but our love. The purpose of religion is therefore reconfigured; henceforth it finds its meaning in the extent to which we are taught to love, and so to show forth the presence of the True God in this world.

Clearly Christians have not always, or even often, understood this. That is why passages such as the one we have before us are so important. This one reminds us of the true purpose and content not just of our faith, but of our lives, and it reminds us as well of how we will fulfill our destinies. We were made to be loved, and to love, it is here, and only here, really, that we will experience redemption.