

Text: John 13: 31-35  
Title: One Little Word  
Date: 05.15.22  
Roger Allen Nelson

It was a typical Tuesday. I listened to old Lutheran lament that there were only 24 people at his church last Sunday. He keeps me abreast of their demise. I saw a Christian Reformed gentleman who worries about the splintering of congregation, classis, and denomination over politics and sexuality. I read about the decline of participation in the Catholic mass and the dearth of young men studying for the priesthood. I read about the “poisoning” of evangelical churches as they wrap Jesus in the robe of Christian nationalism and cultural grievance. I talked to a local pastor who feels the “the dark cloud of sadness and division” that hangs over culture and country. And that evening, amidst the good cheer and delightful spirit of a council meeting, I worried about Hope. It was a typical Tuesday.

Maybe you know the same.

Many of us know an undercurrent of unease. The metaphorical clouds on the horizon are substantial – that we had the second cloudiest April on record didn’t help. The fabric of faith, culture, and community feels stretched, tattered, and thread bare. And....

And, talking, reading, and thinking about it doesn’t seem to engender hope. A sermon cataloguing those concerns only draws attention to the unease; it doesn’t offer solutions. As a friend noted, “I don’t know how to rise above my reasonable fears.”

And then just when we need encouragement, Jesus tells us something that seems so expected, so religious, almost stale....

We need hope and we get a Sunday school answer.

We need vision and Jesus gives us instruction.

We need salve and Jesus gives us a sermon.

Dear friends, what can we hear in this text?

What can we learn anew?

How can these lines of Jesus give us hope, strength, and encouragement for the living of these days?

Consider....

On their last night together, with breadcrumbs in his beard and wine on his breath, Jesus washed his disciples’ feet only to have Judas soon walk out. There were clouds on the horizon and the disciples are rightly uneasy. Then at the close of this intimate meal among friends Jesus launches into his longest sermon or prayer recorded in scripture....

This “Farewell Discourse” is akin to a funeral meditation given by the one dying. With his heart wide-open Jesus prepares his friends for his absence. The few verses we just read are a sort of preamble for what follows. And as a way to set the tone, Jesus says that he is giving them “a new commandment.”

*A new commandment I give you: Love one another....*

Now. This may be Jesus at his rhetorical best, but it’s not a new commandment. In fact, Leviticus 19:18, arguably one of the oldest texts in scripture, reads:

*Do not seek revenge or bear a grudge against anyone among your people, but love your neighbor as yourself. I am the Lord.*

Jesus is not vetting original material. The command to love is treading familiar territory not breaking new ground. It’s said that the love of others is the common thread that runs through all the great religions of the world. So, why does Jesus call it new? If this is boilerplate religious instruction why call it new?

The answer might swing on one little word: *kathos*, translated here as “as.” Jesus says:

*A new commandment I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another.*

Jesus instructs his followers to love as they’ve seen or experienced in him. Love’s model is not moral philosophy or common practice. The guide is not Moses, Abraham, David, or your knuckleheaded neighbor. The archetype for this love is Jesus. The one who called them, the one who washed their feet, the one who is about to be crucified.

*Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another.*

A couple nuances....

It’s worth noting that for John the glory of God is on display on the cross. In the other gospels the cross is the humiliation of Jesus; in John the crucifixion is his glorification. So, in these opening lines of his farewell speech Jesus instructs his disciples to love

not as the world loves,  
not as everyone else loves,  
not even as they’d been instructed to love before,  
but to love as he loves – a love that shines brightest in the cross.

John Calvin puts it this way:

*The glory of God shines, indeed, in all creatures on high and below, but never more brightly than on the cross, in which there was a wonderful change of things ~ the condemnation of all men was manifested, sin blotted out, salvation restored to men, in short, the whole world was renewed and all things restored to order.*

When God's glory is at its brightest, Jesus says, "Love one another, as I have loved you....." This is not love as feeling, or ideal, but love as self-emptying sacrifice. This is love as God's glory.

Second nuance.

The verb form of "love" here is not a command to commence loving. Jesus is not demanding that they start doing something new, but that they continue doing what they're already doing. In the absence of Jesus – carry on loving.

The source of love is God,  
the model of love is Jesus on the cross,  
and the byproduct of love is that "they'll know we are Christians by our love."

Last summer I was hit by a car and spent 3 weeks in intensive care and on the trauma floor at Christ Hospital. I don't remember very much from my stay. Lately, I've been asking Sandi about what happened and what she experienced. I've been trying to fill in holes. It turns out, someone at Hope had the wisdom to discourage visits. I know there were visitors who slipped through the cracks; I couldn't tell you who they all were....

But at the end of those first 3 weeks, I wrote this:

*In the quiet of a hospital room, in the middle of the night when fear is real, I prayed simple prayers: "God help." "God thank you." But I didn't have a unique experience of God's peace or presence. I didn't turn to scripture. I didn't recite hymn lyrics. What I felt was the love and support of others – the presence of God in people. I was buoyed by the visits, calls, texts and stacks of cards. I could feel the love of God in friend and family. It broke through the concussive drug fog. They were the visible expression of an invisible God. I was embarrassed by the attention. I am thankful for a host of friends who love me.*

I don't remember all the details but I know that was true. I remember feeling buoyed, supported, and loved by what Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. called "the beloved community."

*Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another.*

In "Holy Envy: Finding God in the Faith of Others," Barbara Brown Taylor wrestles with the complexity of a multi-religious world, the demise of the church, and what it means to follow Jesus. At one point in suggesting that the future of the church is smaller and humbler, with less property and fewer clergy pensions, she writes this:

*I like a soaring cathedral with a high pulpit and a huge pipe organ as much as the next person, but maybe it is time to swap that out for something that calls a little less attention to itself, something that frees up a little more energy for the*

*neighbor. When everything else is gone, there is still that: the twinned love of God and neighbor, come to vivid life in the person of Jesus.*

Dear friends, you are the beloved community. A community that finds it's calling in one little word: Love as Jesus loved. You are the beloved community called to the twinned love of God and neighbor.

I don't know what to say about a typical Tuesday.

It's easy to be uneasy. It's commonplace to be discouraged or despairing about the state of affairs in country, church, culture, economy, and environment. If you feel any of this, you're not alone.

And, it's easy to make an angry noise in social protest or on social media. I'm not sure about the best way to initiate change, or channel worry or rage. We represent a variety of political impulses about how best to love our neighbor. And sometimes we get stuck or lost in those big political dynamics.

But there is something simple, stripped down, and twinned in what Jesus says here. He doesn't leave us with bells and whistles, light sabers and political platforms. He leaves us with the instruction to love....

So, this morning, can you identify one person – maybe in particular one person who is marginalized or neglected – and can you identify and commit to loving that person?

What would acceptance, kindness, and sacrifice look like in that relationship? If you set aside self-interest, comfort, and familiarity what would love look like? Can you set your heart to love that person in concrete ways that don't expect attention or pay-off? Can you love as you've been loved by Jesus?

I don't know the implications for the big picture. But I believe that light pushes back darkness, love overcomes fear, and life defeats death. It's the glory of God. It's what we're all longing for.

Amen.