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“A New Command”

Psalm 148 John 13:31-35 Acts 11:1-18 Revelation 21:1-6

In this morning's gospel lesson Jesus talks about a new commandment. I love what Ted Koppel said one night on Nightline years ago. He said, 'They're the 10 commandments, not the 10 suggestions.' In the same way when Jesus commands us to love one another it is not a suggestion. It is a command.

When we think of Commandments we tend to think of them as some written down rules that we are supposed to obey but sometimes we, if we are honest, don't. Since there's so many of them it's easy to go easy on ourselves because no one can keep all of them. Right?

I think a command is more intense and more direct than a commandment. A command is something that is given by someone who knows more than the one commanded. It necessitates trust in the one giving the command. This morning we prayed for those currently serving in our Armed Forces. They know what a command is.

If the captain on a ship is in the command center and he or she commands a sailor to hit the deck, the sailor doesn't question. The sailor hits the deck just in time to avoid being swept off the deck by a swinging boom that the sailor didn't see coming. If the sailor stopped to question the meaning of the command the sailor would be in the drink. In the same way, Jesus, our commander, has given us a new command to love one another as he loves us.

Christian love is not something the Lord wants us to FEEL for one another but rather something he wants us to DO for one another.

Notice that the Lord's command is not that we LIKE one another. That certainly would be nice, but to like or not to like is rooted in our emotions, and emotions do not respond to commands. The love of which Jesus speaks is NOT an emotion. It is a way of acting toward one another that says, "No matter what, I want GOOD for you, and I will do whatever I can to insure that you get it."

As to how this love should be measured, our standard comes from the words "as I have loved you." That is a broad and lofty standard indeed! The love that Jesus had for his disciples began with a willingness to ignore the limits of society. He did not content himself with a little group made up of only his "own kind" - he reached out to ALL kinds, and especially to those whom the rest of the world would shun.—uneducated fishermen, educated tax collectors, radical zealots, daydreamers, and a sometime doubter. The love of Jesus enabled him to take on tasks that would have been thought to be beneath him - servant work like washing dusty feet, for example. The love of Jesus was able to encompass the hypocrisy of Peter, the self-serving ambition of James and John, and the

treachery of Judas. It was a love that knew no limit. He loved them so much that he was willing to die for them." 1

In general, much of our contemporary concept of love is unbiblical and unhelpful. Too much of what passes itself off for love today is sentimental, abstract, and romantic, drivel. It is too often connected to things, as if love is something that can be purchased. Like I wrote in my Faith Lift article this week, Love is much more than what makes a Subaru a Subaru.

Don't get me wrong, there is a place for candlelight, secluded beaches, special warm feelings, carefully chosen words, a quiet touch, a caring embrace, but Christian love is more often concrete than abstract. It is more real than mysterious.

It's like the young man that bravely ventured forth to declare his love for his intended. He started out with, "I'm not like that Jim Higgins," I'm not rich; I don't own lake front property; I don't have several cars; I don't vacation in Hawaii every year. But I tell you from the bottom of my heart, that all my love is yours."

"Oh, I know," said the pretty young thing, "but while we're discussing these things, maybe you could tell me a little more about Jim Higgins?"

The dynamics of Christian love are produced more often with sweat than with perfume- more perspiration than inspiration. They must be worked at in a daily world with daily problems that are more often than not devoid of candlelight and secluded beaches. Dynamics of Christian love are not so much the tingling stuff that champagne is made of but rather the Tums that makes many an upset stomach feel better again.

When the Bible says that God loves us, that doesn't mean that God gets all gooey inside when he thinks about us. When God considered his wayward world standing up to its nostrils in the muck of sin, he didn't have romantic heart palpitations. Rather, he extended his patience and unleashed infinite kindness by sending his Son to become a target for spit and unmerciful ridicule, capped off by a horrendous death. That's what love is in its most concrete, potent, and sweaty form.

If we looked at the beginning of this 13th chapter of John, we would see the extent to which Jesus went to demonstrate his love. Judas had just left the last supper to betray him. Jesus knew that in a short time he would be separated from his friends, arrested, tried and crucified. For Jesus, at this point, death was his destiny and not one that was very far off. One of the points Jesus seems to be making throughout this discourse is that we should make the most of the time that we have. He seems to be saying to his disciples: "Pay attention! We haven't got long and you need to hear what I have to say."

Anyone who has had a serious illness or has lost someone close to them knows only too well how short life can be. I hear again and again, the sadness that people face in the death of loved ones over those things that were left unsaid or undone because we just didn't get around to them. We always thought there would be time later. The families that lost loved ones at Santa Fe High school had no warning that when they said goodbye that morning that their loved one would not come home.

So, the question becomes, how do we make the most of the life that we have? With life being all too brief, how do we get the most out of life?

The world has an answer. The world tells us to "go for it"; to "live life to the fullest"; to "reach for the golden ring"; to "grab for what we can get-to reach for the gusto" (whatever gusto is.)

The gospel has a different answer. How do we get the most out of life? We do it by giving our lives away. Jesus said this no less than 13 times: "The person who seeks to save his (or her) life will lose it, but whoever loses his life, that is -- whoever gives it away rather than holding on tight will find it." To make the point even clearer, this Jesus showed everybody just what it meant. He gave himself away for others again and again and again.

His first miracle at Cana was to make people happy at a wedding feast. His last miracle was to replace the ear of a soldier that Peter cut off when he single-handedly tried to fight off a Roman legion. Jesus never counted the cost of giving himself to and for others -- even to giving his life on that cross. Jesus lived out his New Command.

Do we want to get the most out of life? Then we need to hear the message of the gospel that encourages us to give it away -- because only by doing that can we really find out what life is all about.

C.S. Lewis writes, "To love at all is to be vulnerable. Love anything, and your heart will certainly be wrung and possibly be broken. If you want to make sure of keeping it intact, you must give your heart to no one, not even to an animal. Wrap it carefully round with hobbies and little luxuries; avoid all entanglements; lock it up safe in the casket or coffin or your selfishness. But in that casket--safe, dark, motionless, airless--it will change. It will not be broken; it will become unbreakable, impenetrable, irredeemable...The only place outside Heaven where you can be perfectly safe from all the dangers of love ...is Hell." 2

The sharing of human warmth and affection is something which we all desire and need. Loving and being loved is one of the staples of human existence. Although love and physical affection enhance each other, too often the concept of love is too narrowly defined and even misconstrued when one makes physical affection synonymous with love. It simply is not! The art of expressing love is a very broad,

inclusive, endeavor.

To discover how to be really good at expressing love, we must look to God - the greatest of all lovers. God's love for us is not regulated by our response. It is always reaching out towards us. God doesn't love us because we are so loveable. God doesn't need to love us. Rather, we are in need of God's love. In sending his Son Jesus, God demonstrated what true love really is. True love is a willingness to give yourself to another person, not for your sake but for that person's sake. Love regulated by another person's response is not love at all.

Love, in its purest form, is outwardly-directed rather than inwardly-directed. It is the opposite of a selfie. When another person's burden becomes more important than your burden--that is the beginning of love, for love is from God. Paul recognizes this as he writes in 1 Thessalonians 3:12, "And may the Lord make you increase and abound in love to one another and to all men ..." The Lord gives us the ability to increase our ability to love.

Peter was trying to hold on to the Old Commandment to resist eating a pig in a blanket. He was trying to keep faithful to what had been handed down to him...until he had a vision of a new commandment, a new command. Through the vision on the rooftop his eyes were opened to a new way of looking at others. The knock on his door extended an invitation to cross another threshold in his way of looking at life and his community. It showed him that Love is much more than what makes a Subaru a Subaru.

It reminded me of a story I read of an incident that occurred during the Special Olympics. Nine children lined up for the 100 yard dash. The gun sounded and the race was off. But only a few yards into the race, one of the children fell and began to cry. For some reason these challenged children did not understand the world's concept of competition and getting ahead and taking advantage when a competitor was down. The other eight children stopped running and came back to their fallen comrade. A young girl with Down's syndrome kissed him and brushed him off. The children lifted him up together, arm in arm, they ran over the finish line. The audience rose to their feet in applause. There was not one winner, there were nine winners.

For a fleeting moment these children showed us what the Kingdom of God is like. They challenged the world's concept that first place is everything. They loving others more than winning. So should we follow their example as we seek to follow Jesus by following Jesus one ...new command. May we all grow into realizing and understanding all that that new command ... meant.

1. David Leininger, Sounds Just Like Mom
2. C.S. Lewis, The Four Loves, Harcourt, Brace & World, Inc., 1960, p.169.
3. John H Krahn.

Let's pray. Dear Lord, You made heaven, earth, the sea and all that is in them. We praise you for rains and fruitful seasons. You satisfy our hearts with food and gladness. Through Christ you call us to walk in your ways. Give us the grace to obey your new commandment to love one another as we have been loved by you.

Compared to the eternity we will spend with you our lives no matter how long...are short. Help us to make the most of the gift that each day presents. Don't let us be held back by past failures or successes. Don't let fear of the future paralyze us from living and enjoying the gift of the present.

Lord, you alone can satisfy all who thirst after righteousness. Through your Holy Spirit you promise new beginnings; former things pass away as the new comes. We want to live in the light of your counsel and be guided by your wisdom as we call upon your name.

We pray for those burdened with sorrow and pain: hear their cry and hasten to help them. Astonish them with the eternal presence of Jesus their savior who can wipe away tears and restore the wholeness of health. May they find comfort in those of us who reach out to embrace them. Give them patience to trust in the promise that you forsake not your own.

We pray for those who seek new beginnings for whom Christ's resurrection is assurance that their past is forgiven. Some thirst after righteousness. Guide them beside living waters, where they may drink and be refreshed. Others hunger for justice. Lead them to the table of reconciliation and nourish them on the bread of peace. You are the source of all wisdom, compassion and reconciliation. You are the one who we love because you first loved us. Amen.