

Sermon: **Wondrous Love**

Text: John 13:31-35

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### INTRODUCTION TO THE READING

Our Gospel Lesson on this Fifth Sunday in Easter takes us back to just before Jesus' crucifixion and resurrection, to his meeting with his disciples in the upper room. In verses preceding, Jesus washes the disciple's feet even as he knows he is about to be betrayed and he singles out Judas. It's a very dark moment, yet Jesus speaks of his glorification. Hear the reading of John 13:31-35.

### SERMON:

*I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.*

"Love one another." There it is. It's so simple. Just love one another. So what's the problem? Let's just do it, OK?

Well, it sounds a little *too* simple, doesn't it? It sounds so cliché... so Peter-Paul-and-Mary. (For some of you younger folks, I'm referring to the singing group in the 60's, not the biblical characters.)

It's such a simple idea that we talk about so frequently, yet it is surprisingly poorly defined and badly expressed, even among Christian people. Someone put it well – "This commandment is simple enough for a toddler to memorize and appreciate and it is profound enough that the most mature Christians are repeatedly embarrassed at how poorly they comprehend it and put it into practice."

Jesus said, "I give you a *new* commandment." So what's new about this commandment of love?

In one sense God's commandment to love one another is certainly *not* new. The Old Testament law insists, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." (Leviticus 19:18) And did not Jesus himself summarize the fulfillment of the whole moral law of God, saying "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your mind. And you shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets."

So what is new about Jesus' command to his disciples to love one another?

Two aspects of newness are explicit in what Jesus says here.

**1.** This is a new dynamic of love, generated by God's love and perfectly expressed to us in Jesus Christ. "Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another." Put simply, it is the love of Jesus. It is the love of God, who is love, expressed in the person and life of Jesus, who loved us and gave himself for us.

It is a new dimension of love given and made possible to us through Jesus Christ. We love because he first loved us and died for us. This is love flowing out of our experience of God's love. It expresses our oneness with Christ and it is expressed in our love for one another in the community of Christ.

This love is more than a feeling. It is a life lived in self-giving relationship to God and to each other.

This love is more than human propensity and more than a human connection. It is a spiritual bond, joining us as one in Christ.

This love is more than our efforts to obey an ethical demand or to reach a certain standard. It is our experience of Christ's love and it becomes the fulfillment of his love in us. This then becomes the motivating and enabling power of our love for one another.

"As I have loved you." Jesus' love was completed and perfectly expressed on the cross. Our love is always expressed in sacrificial devotion. This new commandment of love changes everything. It is no longer a regulation to curb selfishness and to protect us from each other. It

is new selflessness; a self-giving generosity; an eager love that initiates and reaches out to one another.

This is more than, “Hey, I never hurt anyone”. That is so static; so inert; so sterile. Rather, this love is adventurous and daring and good and wondrous.

Jesus said, “I give you a new commandment.” It is a new dynamic of love, generated by God and perfectly expressed in the person and life of Jesus, who loved us and gave himself for us.

After the crucifixion and resurrection of Christ, these disciples were able to experience and express this new dimension of love. John describes it this way in his first letter.

*Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God; everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love. God's love was revealed among us in this way: God sent his only Son into the world so that we might live through him. In this is love, not that we loved God but that he love us and sent his Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins. Beloved since God loved us so much, we also ought to love one another. No one has ever seen God; if we love one another, God lives in us, and his love is perfected in us. –*

*God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them. –*

*We love because he first loved us. 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. The commandment we have from him is this: those who love God must love their brothers and sisters also.*

**2.** This new love becomes the new distinguishing mark of the Church. Jesus said, “By this, everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.”

Our experience and expression of this new love becomes our witness to the world around. It is what distinguishes us as Christians, and what differentiates us as the community of Christ. A loving community is the visible authentication of the gospel. Someone called it “the final apologetic.

Talk about outreach! People of the first century were blown away by the early Christian community. These Christians didn't live for their own interests. They lived in a kind of reckless generosity to one another. They were a new kind of people living in a new way. They gave themselves to each other. And the people all around couldn't ignore it, saying, “How they love one another!” It was impressive and magnetic. It was extreme yet genuine love.

Talk about outreach! This is the evangelistic power of the church. We are not only to tell people about Christ's love and the meaning of his crucifixion and resurrection, but we are also to embody that love. This becomes the best explanation of how Jesus Christ can transform lives. Without this new dynamic of Christian love being visibly expressed, all of our otherwise credible attempts at outreach will be diminished and undermined. Paul said, “If we have not love, we are noisy gongs and clanging cymbals.

Jesus said,

*I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.*

It sounds simple. But Christ's commandment to love one another as he has loved us, is staggeringly profound. Yet in and by his love for us, we are made able to truly love one another and give ourselves away to each other in ways that distinguish us as Christ's followers; in ways that visibly authenticate the gospel to the world around; and in ways that become our glory, even to the glory of God.

That truly is wondrous love.

Amen.