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First Presbyterian Church, Athens, Georgia
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Texts: John 13: 31-35; 19:25b-27

Love One Another

Social media is filled with happy, loving families immortalized in photos of birthday parties, weddings, and vacations. The pictures of grinning grandparents with their adorable grandchildren just exude endearment. I myself (until recently) had a hallway with 29 framed photos of my own smiling clan posed at our annual family beach trips, which our realtor advised had to go when we listed our house for sale.

But the pictures we post online and hang on our walls may tend more toward Norman Rockwell than normal reality. I distinctly remember one photo from a bygone beach trip that did not make my home gallery. All nine grandchildren in the photo, from the 12-year-old boy to the youngest baby were crying. You see, in families, feelings get hurt, people can be unreasonable, they disagree, and they may not particularly like one another. Sibling rivalry, lost tempers, and childish behavior (by not just the children) make family life less than picture perfect.

Guess what! The same is true of church family. Members get their feelings hurt; they can be unreasonable; they disagree and may not particularly like one another. There can be factions, anger, and immaturity. Add to this: cultural, social, political, and theological differences. What you get is a real mixed bag that is might not be particularly loveable. And yet, just like our biological families, we are supposed to love our church family. Jesus said so.

It was his last night with his disciples. He knew his hour was at hand. So, he gathered his friends—the nascent church, you could say—for a farewell meal together. As the Gospel of John tells it, he—their rabbi, teacher, professor—gives them his Last Lecture. He has a lot to say. Jesus in the Gospel of John can be rather longwinded. Beginning with a tender address, “Little Children,” he says, “I am with you only a little longer.” Continuing, he tells them that he is going to leave them and go where they cannot yet follow. And then comes to his topline idea, his most important point, what all his teaching boils down to: “I give you a new commandment, that you love one another.”

His final instruction to his band of followers was simply to love one another. He had been with them three years, holding them together like the matriarch of family. But now he will no longer physically be there, and they must stay together. They must love one another.

“Love one another,” Jesus commanded the disciples. And just in case there was any question about what their love should look like, he added a clarification. “Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another.”

How had Jesus loved his disciples? Their feet, still damp and refreshed, silently shouted how Jesus had loved them. During their supper he had knelt down on the hard floor with a towel and bucket of water. One by one he had scrubbed their smelly, dust-encrusted feet as they stared in disbelief. One by one he had cared for each in a personal, practical way.

My mother wasn't one for displays of affection, sentimentality, or flowery speech. But

was she ever loving! Her love shone through in the countless hours she spent cooking, carpooling, sewing, volunteering on boards, working in the church kitchen, growing and giving away fruits of her labor like fresh asparagus, pickled green beans, and raspberry jam, and donating upwards of 40 gallons of blood over her lifetime. I will never forget her ministrations when I had foot surgery as a teenager. After the casts were off, she nightly filled a tub with warm water and Epsom salts for my feet to soak. Then she would kneel down and dry them with a towel. Afterward, she gently massaged them with hands brown from the sun and knuckles becoming gnarled from arthritis. It was Maundy Thursday every evening in our den for weeks.

How had Jesus loved his disciples? In spite of his talk of leaving, the disciples did not grasp that he was speaking about his impending death. It wasn't until later, after it all went down on Friday and it all came up (so to speak) on Sunday that they remembered and understood his death as an act of love. Clearly, he was not a victim. He was not duped by a religious or political power play. He could have skipped town or called upon a legion of angels at any point but did not. He willingly went to the cross for them. He willingly gave up his life. "No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends," he said that very night to them all.

How had Jesus loved them? Jesus loved selflessly. He loved not counting the cost. He knew in advance about Judas' betrayal, about Peter's denial, about the abandonment by most of his friends. Yet he loved them anyway. It wasn't nails that held him to that Roman cross. It was love. Love to the utmost, love to the end--that's how Jesus had loved his disciples.

"Love one another," he told them, "just as I have loved you."

The day after their farewell meal, as he was dying on the Cross, he said it again, in so many words. He saw his mother and one of his disciples ("the beloved disciple") standing together. To his mother he said, "Woman, here is your son." To the disciple, he said, "Here is your mother." We have learned that in John's gospel, there's usually a deeper meaning than what meets the eye. So, Jesus was not simply making practical arrangements for the care of his mother. In the gospel writer's wonderful way of telling the story, Jesus was asking the church to love one another. If you'll notice, there are no personal names here in the text. It's not Mary, but simply "his mother." It's not John or Lazarus or whoever, but simply "the beloved disciple." These two are stand-ins, if you will, for all of us in the church. Jesus from the Cross put these two people together and told them to be family to each other, i.e. to love and care for each other, just as Jesus puts all of us together in the church and tells us to be family to each other, i.e. to love and care for each other. Notice, he doesn't ask their permission or give them personality tests to be sure they are a good fit.

When I was the pastor of the little church in South Carolina we embarked on a big building project, adding an elevator and new entrance and accessible restrooms. I worked closely with two church members. One was a man I was not crazy about, nor he, me. We just rubbed each other the wrong way. The other I did like, in spite of the fact that he quite honestly did not believe that women should be pastors and had told me so. "Really?" I said to God. "Couldn't you find some other people for this project?" One had a fulltime job and the other though retired, worked parttime helping his son. In spite of busy lives, every day, one or both of these men showed up in their hard hats to consult with me and oversee the construction. They also showed up with respect and kindness for me. Despite our differences, they focused

on the mission at hand. Thanks to the devotion and humble service of these two men--without whom the project would never have happened, whom I never would have chosen, but whom God put me with—thanks to them, that church family has a building that is now welcoming to all comers. And thanks to their obedience to Jesus’ command, their pastor experienced Christian love in action.

We gather here tonight as a church family whom Jesus has put together and commanded us to love. We gather as a motley crew. We have myriad gifts, experiences, preferences, and identities. We are comprised of

- those who are just beginning a journey of faith and those who have been traveling this road many years
- those who have deep pockets and those who are deep in debt
- those whose ancestors are from Europe and those whose forebears come from Africa and Asia
- those who take the Virgin birth as a biological miracle and those who see it as a theological affirmation
- those who vote blue and those who vote red
- those who embraced mask mandates and those who bristled at them
- those who call others “you guys” and those who say “y’all,” and even those who say “all y’all!”

We gather as a diverse family around *one* table—the Lord’s Table. We don’t choose who is here just like we don’t choose our biological family. We just have to love them. Because Jesus commands us to do so. That’s where we get the word “Maundy” from, as in “Maundy Thursday.” It comes from the Latin, *mandatum*, in the Vulgate translation of our text. *Mandatum* means “commandment.” “I give you a new commandment, to love one another, just as I have loved you.”

Loving our church family may not always be easy, but it is required. And the only hope we have to accomplish it is rooted in the fact that God, revealed to us in Jesus Christ, loves us. God stands beside us, in solidarity with us, supporting us in every trial, every rejection, every ounce of suffering, through every darkness, in life and in death. God loves us and empowers us to love each other in Christlike ways. Charity (the old-fashioned, King James word for “love”) begins at home. It begins with our fellow “little children” of God, our brothers and sisters in the church, which includes, by the way, the universal church—all branches of our Christian family tree. But it doesn’t stop there. It moves beyond our church family to include the human family. And when love is practiced, the remarkable authenticity of it and selfless nature of it make people notice. “By this,” Jesus said, “everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.”

You may remember the church camp song that begins, “We are one in the Spirit, we are one in the Lord.” It was written in the 1960s by a Catholic priest in South Chicago for his youth choir. They were to go to an interracial ecumenical meeting. But he couldn’t find any appropriate music for them, so he wrote the song. The refrain says, “And they will know we are Christians by our love, by our love, yes, they will know we are Christians by our love.”

May it be so.