



## *Round Hill Community Church*

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### **Sermon: May 2, 2010**

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#### **A New Commandment?, Robert B. Culp**

John 13:31-35

It seems sometimes that things just don't make sense to us until we look back at them through the passage of time. A certain word, a particular gesture, an expression that was puzzling at the time may suddenly become clear in the light of later events. Or perhaps what seemed to be a small detail that got passed over in the crush of events is remembered later, and its significance is recognized for the first time.

This morning's text from John invites us to look back upon the events of Holy Week, as it returns us to that upper room where Jesus shared a last meal with his closest followers. All the awful things that would lead to Golgotha's cross have been set into motion, and Judas has gone out into the night to do quickly what he was going to do. Those who remain with Jesus know something terrible and frightening is about to take place, but they cannot grasp nor understand what all the events of the days to come are going to mean.

Only later, after the resurrection and after Jesus' appearance to the disciples in another room during another meal, would the meaning of Jesus' words that final night begin to become clear to them. Only then would those words be able to take shape in the lives of our Lord's very first followers.

Jesus is expressing his goodbye's to his friends, and he wants to leave them with special encouragement and counsel. So he tells them what it means to belong to him, and how they would continue to belong to him after he leaves them. In the manner of a loving mother and a caring brother, he says, "Little children, I am with you only a little longer. You will look for me ... but where I am going you cannot come. I'm asking you to remember me by giving you a new commandment, that you love one another, just as I have loved you. By this love you show one another, the world will know you as my disciples."

I suspect Jesus' followers were filled with questions upon hearing those words – "What can you possibly mean? Where are you going, and why can't we come along? If you are going to be glorified, whatever that means, then why are we feeling scared to death? And what's so new about your commandment to love, for that's basic teaching we all learned at synagogue years ago?"

Only later, when they looked back on the events of that night and the next day, when their beloved teacher and friend was hanging on the cross, did it begin to make any kind of sense ... "Love one another, just as I have loved you."

Think for a moment what Jesus was saying to them: “Just as I have loved you.” He could have asked them, “How have I loved you? In what ways have you come to experience my love, our Abba Father’s love, while I have been with you these past years?” And consider what Jesus must have been remembering and expressing to his dear “little children” ...

“I went to where you lived and worked, and I called you to follow me. I spent time teaching you, encouraging you to open wide your eyes and ears and hearts so that you could discover afresh life’s richness and goodness. And I blessed you.

“I invited you to be a part of everything I have been doing. You were with me when I gave sight to the blind man, and breathed life into Lazarus who walked out of his tomb. I was with you when you were scared out of your minds during that storm at sea.

“I cared for you as a shepherd cares for his sheep, and I showed you in many ways the human face and touch and embrace of God.

“This very night I took a basin and towel, stooped low, and washed your feet and lovingly dried them, and I did this to give you an example for how you should do the same for one another. You didn’t understand that, and in fact it made you more than a little uncomfortable ... but you’ll come to understand it.

“And tomorrow morning, before the rest of the world is finished having breakfast, I will be taken to a barren hill outside the city gates and nailed to a cross. You won’t understand that either, not until later. And then you will know what I have done because of my love for you. Then you will know what it means to love one another just as I have loved you.”

These are difficult and poignant words, and Jesus speaks these words about how he has loved them with such tenderness.

But what kind of love is this? This is a love that goes way beyond the boundaries of ordinary neighborliness. It is far more than honoring a neighbor’s rights, and respecting her space, and doing a good deed every now and then.

It doesn’t have much to do with simple affection or warm-fuzzy feelings. Instead, this kind of love is something fierce and uncompromising, and without easy sentimentality at all. It is an unconditional love that is willing to spend itself for the sake of the other. It is a love that cannot be captured in simple formulas or reasoned logic. For this is an incarnate love that is manifested and demonstrated in concrete actions. And this is the kind of love that is to be the distinguishing mark of all followers of Jesus Christ in any age.

In his memoir of his life as a young man newly immigrated to New York City, the Irish-American writer Frank McCourt tells the story of his landlady Agnes Klein. She is the Catholic widow of a Jewish man she lost to the Nazis, and the mother of a boy named Michael who never grew up after what he saw in the concentration camps. Mrs. Klein follows her tenant around with her vodka and orange juice while she tells the sad and searching story of her life and its many disappointments and betrayals.

Every few weeks, two Catholic nuns come to her place to help her – Sister Mary Thomas and Sister Beatrice. Their job is to bathe Michael, to wash his sheets, to clean the apartment, and to watch over Mrs. Klein as she bathes herself in order to make sure she doesn’t pass out in the bathtub. Sister Mary Thomas spends a lot of her time pursuing the young McCourt, reminding him to go to mass, telling him to leave NYU where she believes he is in danger of losing his faith, and making plans secretly to baptize Michael.

But Sister Beatrice, on the other hand, is described by McCourt as always being so busy that she rarely speaks. Of her ministry of love, he writes,

“While Sister Mary Thomas tries to save my soul from atheistic communism, Sister Beatrice is giving Mrs.

Klein a bath or cleaning Michael – what’s left of him. Sometimes when Sister Beatrice opens Michael’s door, the smell that drifts up the hall is enough to make you sick, but that doesn’t stop her from going in. She still washes him and changes him and changes his bedclothes, and you can hear her humming hymns. If Mrs. Klein has drunk too much and gets cranky over having to take a bath, Sister Beatrice holds her, hums her hymns, and strokes the little brown tufts on her head until Mrs. Klein is a little child in her arms.”

So it is that love is something you do. It’s a verb, as it were, rather than a noun. Whatever else could be said about Jesus’ words to his disciples, the love he commands is not too spiritual for this world. It is not too timid or squeamish, it is not afraid of hard work, it is not reluctant to go to those places where it is needed.

For this love sits by the bedside and holds the hand of a dying person, being prayerfully present and quietly reverent. Such love opens a health clinic in a city’s poorest section, providing care to those who cannot afford it and counsel to those who are largely ignored. Such love goes into the city’s schools and works patiently with at-risk children who are struggling to learn to read. Such love, Jesus’ love, takes on the burden of an aching back and calloused hands as it builds a Habitat House. His love goes to the most economically depressed areas of Appalachia and shares work and meals and friendship and hope in community. Indeed, such love ... the love we are commanded to share ... hears the hidden pain in another’s voice, and offers to listen and pray and share in the burdens of that particular person’s journey.

Now, maybe there’s nothing very new about doing these things. After all, they reflect Jewish teachings which, as Jesus’ disciples knew, have always called for the love of one’s neighbor to be shown through concrete acts of justice and mercy and compassion (known as mitzvot, in the Jewish faith). What is new, however, is when these acts are a sign of Jesus’ life at work in us. Keeping such a commandment is the tangible sign of our abiding in Jesus and of Jesus’ abiding in us. Thus it is that our acts of love which we do in his name bind us more closely to him, and remind us that we belong to him.

That’s what makes this love the distinguishing mark of Jesus’ followers. Quite wondrously, this love glorifies God, as God was glorified in Jesus Christ on the night when he stooped low to wash his disciples’ feet, and let his betrayer go out into the night to do what he had to do, and from the cross asked forgiveness for those who did not know what they were doing. The Gospels are filled with stories about Jesus’ love for those with whom he dared to associate – the outcasts, the unclean, the marginalized, the questionable people of society ... even those who were his enemies seeking to do him in.

And the love he embodied is to be lived out in concrete ways every day by you and me.

This is the love that is willing to enter the sad and dangerous places of our world ... the places of hunger, disease, and deprivation ... whether in South Norwalk or Stamford, in Mississippi or West Virginia, in Nicaragua or Haiti. This is the love that is willing to meet the violence and hatred and betrayals of the world, with nothing to hold against the darkness except Christ’s sure victory over it, and his life and love coursing through our lives. This is the love that continues to affirm that the love is God is stronger than sickness and infirmity, fear and death, and stronger even than the evil human beings may do to each other. And our faith teaches us and reassures us that this is the love that dares to affirm that God will bring a day when “mourning and crying and pain will be no more” ... and when “God will wipe every tear” from our eyes.

Until that day, you and I are called to love others and ourselves “just as Jesus has loved us.” And that means letting our lives be transformed by his love which knows no limits, and letting his commandment take shape in our lives. By doing so, the world will know us as his disciples.

Let us pray: Gracious Lord, you have called us to be your partners in loving service to those you give us to see. Free our imaginations so that we may discern the places where you are leading us and the lives you are inviting us to touch with your wondrous love. Empower us to be your messengers of faith, so that by our love we may inspire hope and confidence and peace, in Jesus' name. Amen.