

Love One Another

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**Sermon Series: From
the Pew to the World**

John 13:31-35

***Love isn't only
a feeling, love
is an action.
Love is as love
does.***

Dietrich Bonhoeffer was a prominent preacher and teacher, a contemporary Christian martyr and one of my spiritual heroes. To counteract Hitler's rise to power prior to World War II, he established the Confessing Church, to keep the German Protestant Church free from the influence of Nazism. When it was learned that Bonhoeffer led an illegal seminary for Confessing Church pastors in Germany, the Gestapo banned him from all public speaking. His resistance made him a target for the Nazis, so Christians arranged for Bonhoeffer to flee his homeland for asylum in the States. He joined the faculty of Union Seminary in New York, but his conscience would not let him rest, knowing that Confessing Church members were suffering for the sake of the gospel. So, Bonhoeffer left his comfortable teaching position and voluntarily returned to Germany. He continued his resistance efforts, was arrested by the Nazis and sent to a concentration camp in Flossinburg. Three weeks before the liberation of the city, Bonhoeffer was executed for being an out-spoken Christian.

His German theology students recalled the last lecture Bonhoeffer delivered before his arrest. Sensing his impending arrest, he interrupted his lecture to ask his students whether they loved Jesus. His students were surprised by this unexpected question, since semin-

ary academicians don't place as much emphasis on personal devotion. They prefer to debate the existence of God and the mission of the church but not personal questions about loving Jesus. Bonhoeffer brought his students back to the core message of the faith. A true disciple loves Jesus and does what he says.

We talk a great deal about being a disciple-making church. We are learning our whole lives what it means to love and follow Jesus. The danger is reducing love to an emotion, something we feel for God, rather than something we do for God. In the words of Forrest Gump, "Mama always said stupid is as stupid does." Love is as love does. Love isn't only a feeling, love is an action. It does little good to feel lovingly toward someone if we don't follow through with loving actions.

Our Scripture lesson introduces us to a portion of John's gospel known as Jesus' farewell discourse. These words serve, in effect, as Jesus' last will and testament. Jesus has gathered with his disciples in the upper room to share a last supper. Jesus knows his days are numbered; that's why he tells his disciples, "I am only with you for a little while longer" (13:33). Knowing his arrest is imminent, Jesus issues his farewell command, "I give you a new commandment that you love one another (13:34).

On one level, there is nothing new about this command. This

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command is several thousand years old, as ancient as the Mosaic Law itself. We read in the Torah, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself" (Leviticus 19:18). What is altogether new is that no one has ever seen God's love perfectly modeled in a person before. God's love has become fully incarnate in Jesus Christ.

Jesus declares, "By this will everyone know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another" (13:35). The distinguishing mark of Christians is not our position on social issues. It is not our stand on personal morality. The distinguishing mark of Christians is our love for one another

St. Jerome, a second-century church patriarch, recalls his friendship with the apostle John, who wrote the gospel that bears his name. He recalls John, at the end of his life, repeating over and over again the words, "Little children, love one another." His contemporaries would tire of hearing John say these words, so they asked, "Teacher, why do you always say this?" John answered, "It is the Lord's command. If this alone be done, It is enough."

John declares emphatically that God loves the whole world. "God so loved the world that he gave his only Son..." (John 3:16). We are commanded to love everyone, even our enemies. But the one group singled out for special affection is fellow believers. This is how the world will know we are his disciples if we have love for one another.

Love one another figures prominently in the letters of John, as well. John doesn't mince words

when he writes, "Those who say, "I love God" but 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 (1 John 4:20).

We are currently engaged in a sermon series focused on the mission of the church. I said, two Sundays ago, every believer is a disciple, every disciple is a missionary and every missionary has a mission field or sphere of influence.

Last Sunday, I refocused the sermon on the shootings at Virginia Tech. This tragedy only sets in bold relief what we are doing here. In the aftermath of this horrific crime, the mission of Jesus Christ has never been more compelling.

Love one another is an essential part of God's missionary strategy. "By this everyone will know you are my disciples if you have love for one another." How will the world know of God's great love for them if they don't see it practiced among those who claim allegiance to him?

John 13 is not a hard passage to understand. It's rather simple and straightforward. This passage is not hard to comprehend; it's hard to put into practice. It doesn't require interpretation, it calls for application.

Love one another can easily dissolve into empty platitudes. What does it really mean for Christians to love one another? Ask yourself this question: Is our love for one another other-centered or self-centered?

Sin is essentially selfishness. Luther called sin "The self curved in upon itself." What Malcom Muggeridge called "the dark little dungeon of my own ego." Walker

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- Mahatma Gandhi

Percy describes sin as “the self stuffed with the self.”

John offers a one-sentence description of love in his epistle: “This is love, that he [Christ] laid down his life for us and so we also ought to lay down our lives for one another” (1 John 3:16).

Ask yourself whether you take pleasure in showing honor or receiving honor? Are we more eager to give or receive praise? We are instructed in Romans to “Out-do one another in showing honor” (Romans 12:10).

Paul implores us in Ephesians to “speak truth in love” (Ephesians 4:15). Love and truth represent two sides of the same coin.

Sodium is an extremely active element found naturally only in combination with other elements. Chlorine, however, can stand alone as a natural element, as a poisonous gas. But when there is a bonding of sodium and chlorine ions, the result is sodium chloride or common table salt.

Love and truth are comparable to sodium and chloride. Love without truth can be excessively tolerant and permissive. Truth without love becomes hard and brittle. Love and truth need each other. They bind together as one.

What does it really mean to love one another? Ask yourself this question: Do we practice forgiveness or hold grudges?

If you hang around the church for any length of time, you’re going to get hurt. Mark my word. Living together in close proximity to each other will enrich your life as well as hurt your feelings.

The German philosopher Schopenhauer likened the human

community to porcupines huddled together on a cold winter’s night. The colder it gets outside, the more we huddle together for warmth. But the closer we get to one another, the more we hurt one another with our sharp quills.

The closer we become in the church, the more likelihood there is that we will hurt one another. People will say things in the church that are thoughtless and cruel. We will encounter in Christian community perceived slights or cutting remarks.

Paul writes in Colossians, “Bear with one another and if anyone has a complaint against another, forgive one another, just as the Lord has forgiven you, so you must also forgive” (3:13).

Paul urges us to bear or put up with one another; to tolerate one another’s idiosyncrasies. Don’t nurse old hurts; forgive them!

The writer of Hebrews encourages us to “provoke one another to love and good deeds (10:24). Don’t provoke one another to the point of aggravation; provoke one another to love and good deeds.

There is remarkable power in the words “I’m sorry.” I find these words to be incredibly liberating. Have you noticed these days how people qualify their apologies? Public apologies now come with a qualifier, “I’m sorry if I offended you,” as if the apology pertains only to those who feel offended. Drop the alibi and just say “I’m sorry.” Mahatma Gandhi said, “The weak can never forgive. Forgiveness is an attribute of the strong.”

When the church is other-centered and forgiving, the effect is positively winsome and attractive to

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- W. H. Auden

outsiders. Guests will be drawn to seeing love in action. The early church leader, Tertullian, writing in the third century, wrote of how pagans would remark of the early church, “See, how they love another; how they are ready to die for one another.”

The way some Christians act, Tertullian must be spinning in his grave. In one episode of *The Simpsons*, Homer Simpson asks his Christian fundamentalist neighbors where they have been. They answer they have been to a Christian camp to practice how to be more judgmental. When we don't love one another, we discredit the good news of Jesus Christ. It makes our profession hollow and artificial.

When World War II began in Europe, W. H. Auden composed a poem entitled *September 1, 1939*. Auden records the memorable line, “Love one another or die.” If we do not love one another, the church will die a spiritual death. God will get up, walk out of here and go somewhere else.

Love one another is a vital part of God's missionary strategy. “By this everyone will know you are my disciples if you have love for one another.”