

“The Cement That Holds Us Together”

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Text: John 13:31-35

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Tuesday night we attended the awards concert for the High School Symphonic Band and Wind Ensemble. In the program booklet, which was distributed that night, there were short messages from the graduating seniors reflecting upon their time in band. Many of their comments contained references to events or situations which only band members would appreciate. Inside talk, words, phrases, images that if spoken by or to someone outside the band would have a different meaning. You see, relationships determine meaning. Relationships we have determine what we hear said. Relationships determine meaning – words whispered in a family aren't the same when shouted on the street. Words of a friend aren't the same when quoted by an enemy. Those who love us can say what those who do not love us never can. A preacher who is also a good pastor and a preacher who is aloof and uncaring say different things with the same words. Relationships determine meaning.

Relationship is the key to the passage before us from the 13th chapter of John. The announcement of His approaching death presupposes that the relationship of the group to Jesus is primary, and Jesus seeks to translate that relationship of the disciples to him to a fellowship that exists among them, characterized by love. Notice the language Jesus uses: “Little children.” “I am with you only a little longer.” “You will look for me.” “Where I am going you cannot follow me now; but you shall follow afterward.” This is family talk – painful conversation in a circle of friends about to lose the one who is their reason for being together. It almost seems like an effort to explain death to the children in the family.

Through John's gospel, we are able to hear some inside talk – talk that's appropriate for inside the church – but which isn't very meaningful over the loudspeaker in the parking lot. The concern of Jesus in this text is that the disciples' relationship to Him inform and determine their relationship to each other. Jesus is leaving and nothing will be gained by longing after Him, or by thinking this is the end of everything, or that life is now stale, flat, and tasteless without meaning. As He had loved them, they are to love each other, and in this way the witness will continue to be made to the world. The “one another” of the words of Jesus here quite clearly refers to the disciples, the community of faith. There are times and there are texts that call for love in a larger circle, but not here. Here love is the cement to hold together the community of faith. Love for those within and love for those without are not mutually exclusive. The error lies in allowing the one to excuse us from the other.

Why does John include all of this in his gospel account? Apparently in the Johanine community, there was an immediate need for internal love and harmony. Whether the problem in the church lay in the area of personality conflicts or doctrinal disputes or tensions created by outside pressure is not clear, but whatever the cause, the elimination was considered essential to the continued life of the community as disciples of Jesus. That's why John felt it important to include these words of Jesus about a new commandment.

A new commandment I give you – He said to the faithful Jews who were His disciples – and who already had ten perfectly good commandments, thank you very much. Not a recommendation – not a suggestion – not a resolution but a commandment. Some have suggested that what Jesus gives His disciples – and us – is the 11th Commandment. Now you may have heard that the 11th Commandment is to not speak ill of a fellow Republican – that originated with Ronald Reagan. There is a novel entitled the *11th Commandment* which refers to it being “Thou Shall Not Get Caught.” Others have claimed the 11th Commandment is (A) Honor Thy Child (song), (B) “Thou Shalt Not Exploit the Lord Thy God for Cheap Political Gain,” (C) Care for Your Pets, (D) from one parent to the advertising industry: “Thou Shall Not Covet My Child's Purse.”

The 11th Commandment. One church decided to take Jesus' words seriously – in Lewiston, Idaho, there is Orchard Eleventh Commandment Church. Jesus said, “I give you a new commandment.” Now remember, to love others wasn't a new commandment, but to love others as much as Christ loved others was revolutionary.

Jesus is the standard by which our love is measured. The love of Jesus is the rule by which our love is gauged. We hear Jesus say, “Love one another as I have loved you.” Now a lot of us are tempted to say, “OK, Jesus, I'll love people. But let me pick who those people will be.” Notice here that Jesus didn't say: “Go out and find some people to love.” No, here in this passage Jesus is talking to the disciples at the Last Supper – He is saying His farewells. And His instruction is for them to love each other. Right away, Peter finds a

problem with that. When Jesus announces to the disciples that He's about to leave them, meaning that He's about to return to heaven, Peter begs Him to take him along. In effect, Peter was saying, "Jesus, if you take me to heaven with you, I'll do all the loving you want me to do. But don't leave me here with these 11 other schmucks. You can't possibly expect me to love them." But that's exactly what Jesus meant for him to do. After all, a mother doesn't pick and choose which baby to take home. If her baby comes out kind of squished and funny looking, the mother still loves the child.

A mother doesn't wander around the maternity ward, seeing if someone wants to trade. That's what some folk do – some folk are church hoppers – people who want to pick and choose who it is that they're willing to love. They go to one church and find some reason to get upset, and then they go to another church and see that the people are funny looking there, and go to another church, and on and on. Now this isn't to say that loving people is an easy thing. Someone went up to a nurse who worked in a section of a hospital where the critically ill people were treated and said, "You must really love people to do this kind of work." But the nurse said, "Love for people wouldn't keep me here one hour. It's love for God that keeps me here." In other words, we are to love our fellow church members not because they're loveable or likeable. No, we're to love them because we love God, and loving them is what God wants us to do. And that's important to keep in mind, that we're able to love others, only because God has loved us first. What Jesus is saying is that whether we realize it or not, the love we show for each other is a sign. As Jesus said: "By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another." In other words, by loving each other, that becomes a sign to us and to the people around us that God is real, that God is with us.

There's an interesting passage in the Old Testament book of Zechariah, where it says that the day will come when people who have never had any connection to God will go up to God's people and take them by the collar and say, "Take us to meet your God." The idea is that by looking at God's people, those on the outside will be able to tell that something special is happening and they'll want to come and be a part of it.

You see, whether we love each other or choose not to, that says a lot to the people on the outside. Because most people are going to make up their minds as to what God is all about by looking at congregations like ours and seeing what we're all about. If people see us loving and caring for each other, then that's what they're going to figure that God is like. And if they see that when we disagree, we do so in an attitude of love and compassion, that we are honest and take responsibility for our feelings and that we put the welfare of the entire church first above our personal preferences, then they'll see that this is a community of which they would want to be a part. But if instead, they look at us and see a lot of fussing and fighting and bickering and pettiness, they're going to wonder why anyone would want to be associated with a God whose people are like that. So whether we decide to love each other or not really matters. It matters because God's reputation is at stake.

After a lot of drinking, one man said to another: "I bet you \$20 you can't go into that church and confess all your sins to the priest." So the other man accepted the bet and went in. With very slurred speech the man proceeded to confess every possible sin he could remember. For his penance, the priest told him to go and stand in front of the cross and say: "All this you have done for me, and I don't care." But when the man went over to the cross and began to say those words, he found he couldn't finish the sentence.

As we look at the cross and remember all that God has done for us, do we care? If so, then Jesus Christ tells us to show that we care. To show that we care by loving each other. By loving real people in real ways. By not trying to be selective and trying to find the kind of people who are easy to love, but loving the people who are around us right now, warts and all. You see, whether we do that, whether we love each other or not, matters. Because there's a world out there looking at us. Lots of people are looking and trying to decide if the kind of God who's at the center of our lives is the kind of God that they would want at the center of their lives.

O God, we know that as long as the world sees Christians loving each other, it still sees Jesus Christ. May it be said of First Christian Church – see how they love each other. Amen.

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