

By This All Men Will Know
May 2, 2010
John 13:31 – 35

Special thanks to the Reverend Andy Braunston of the Metropolitan Community Church of Manchester for providing much of the inspiration for today's sermon.

Listen now for the reading of God's Word for the people of God.

³¹When he was gone, Jesus said, "Now is the Son of Man glorified and God is glorified in him.

³²If God is glorified in him, God will glorify the Son in himself, and will glorify him at once.

³³"My children, I will be with you only a little longer. You will look for me, and just as I told the Jews, so I tell you now: Where I am going, you cannot come.

³⁴"A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. ³⁵By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another."

This is the Word of God and It can be trusted. Thanks be to God.

Let us pray.

Dear Lord:

Because love is patient: Help us to be slow to judge, but quick to listen, hesitant to criticize, but eager to encourage, remembering your endless patience with us.

Because love is kind: Help our words to be gentle and our actions to be thoughtful. Remind us to smile and to say "Please" and "Thank You" because those little things still mean so much.

Because love does not envy or boast, and it is not proud: Help us have a heart that is humble and sees the good in others. May we celebrate and appreciate all that we have and all that we are, as well as doing the same for those around us.

Because love is not rude or self-seeking: Help us to speak words that are easy on the ear and on the heart. When we are tempted to get wrapped up in our own little world, remind us there's a great big world out there full of needs and hurts.

Because love is not easily angered and keeps no record of wrongs: Help us to forgive others as you have forgiven us. When we want to hold onto a grudge, gently help us release it so we can reach out with a hand of love instead.

Because love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth: Help us stand up for what is right and good. May we defend the defenseless, and help the helpless. Show us how we can make a difference.

Because love always protects and always trusts: Help us to be a refuge for those around us. When the world outside is harsh and cold, may our hearts be a place of acceptance and warmth.

Finally, because love always perseveres: Help our hearts continually beat with love for You and for others.

In the name of our Holy Redeemer; our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, Amen.

During our Easter Season we have had the opportunity to look at those teachings of the Risen Christ that immediately followed the resurrection, as well as those that preceded his betrayal. In our study, we have followed the scriptures of the liturgy and we have determined that the overall theme of this Easter Season has been a responsibility for us to not only realized that the voice of God is ever present, but also that in order to hear the voice that calls to us, we must learn to listen and this is not always easy for us to do; especially in a world as full of distractions as the one we each live in today. The first three readings of the Easter Season offered us the words of Christ that were brought to his disciples and friends following his resurrection, whereas last week's reading, as well as today's reading offer as a flash back reading. Theses readings give us the opportunity to view the final days of Christ with hindsight and provide for us a powerful opportunity to look at the words he chose to prepare his disciples for his impending death and foretold resurrection.

I find today's reading to be incredibly timely and appropriate for each of us today. In listening to the voice of God, we must each learn to listen and learning to listen is not all that easy, in fact is downright difficult for many of us. Most of us associate the act of *hearing* the voice of God with an actual audible experience, but as we have briefly discussed before, hearing God's voice can be experienced in many ways. Some of us may hear audibly the voice of God – in lyrics of our favorite praise and worship song, in the words of someone we encounter, or in the cries of those who hurt around us. Likewise, many of us may *hear* the voice of God in gentle breeze, the beauty of a sunrise, the smile of those we encounter or in the pain and suffering of those around us. As we begin to understand that listening and hearing can take on different form, so too we find in our scripture reading today, that Christ is offering each of us a *new command*, though its words do not seem that unfamiliar to us. “A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another.” (Vv. 34 – 35)

Why should such a command be communicated as something *new*? Was it so uncommon for the disciples to experience and show love from and for one another that Christ really had to command them to do so? Well, as we have seen with *hearing*, so too we see that *loving* is an experience that is not so well defined and often misunderstood. “To say, ‘I love you’ is perhaps the most overused and misunderstood words in the English Language. We know what *we* mean by them but, it seems, we don't always understand what we mean.” (Braunston, 2004)

In our culture *love* is often defined as a feeling, but in the Greek, from which most of the New Testament was translated, we find that the word love appears in many forms and takes on many meanings. Here at New Day Worship Center we have a motto of sorts; *One God, One Love*. But just as our doctrinal understanding of God teaches us that our One God is comprised

of three states of consciousness – our Creator, our Redeemer and our Sustainer – so too, we must come to the realization that our One Love is comprised of four parts; the *eros*, the *philia*, the *storge*, and the *agape*. More simply state, One Love for us has four meanings and these four meanings provide for us one love.

The first word, *eros* is the most familiar to all of us. It is the same word that gives us the English word *erotic*. It's the exciting wow stuff we experience when we meet that certain someone we are attracted to. *Eros* involves hormones and pheromones and energy. It is the kind of love that makes us to silly, sometimes stupid, and is what most people think love is. The kind of love that is described by *eros* leaves us wanting to find pleasure in the company and often body of another. This can be negative when we desire *only* to find pleasure and fulfillment for ourselves; void of wanting to give that pleasure and fulfillment to others. When we start a romantic relationship it is the *eros* which lights the fire in us. It's great! It's like the thrill of a roller coaster, but like all good roller coaster rides, even though its fast, exciting and has lots of ups and downs; the thrill doesn't last all that long. In fact, most of us find that after a while the roller coaster can make us sick. When that initial excitement of the *eros* begins to wear off many perceive that the love is *dying*. Once the hormones and pheromones die off love is no longer about a feeling but rather a responsibility to build a relationship. Just as the voice of God becomes dulled in the business and chaos of our everyday lives, so too the *eros* of our relationships can become weakened and that love will die if we let other things get in the way. Love is not feeling, rather it is an act of our will just as hearing the voice of God in our lives must be a conscious, purposeful act of our lives. Our inability to hear God's voice will leave many of us wanting more – forcing us to turn from one *new age* fad to the next. Likewise, our

inability to recognize love as more than a feeling can lead us from one relationship to the next; leaving us wanting more.

Apart from this romantic love there is also love between friends. The Greeks call this love, *phillia*. Again, this love is familiar to many of us. It is the kind of love that makes us fiercely loyal to those closest to us. In addition to *phillia* we have the Greek love of *storge*, that is the love we feel for our families. This, again, is different from the *eros* and the *phillia*. We choose our friends, we do not, however choose our families. It would not be unreasonable to think that each of us was brought up to love our families. Equally so, it is reasonable to say that for it is easier to love some of our family members than others. Oddly enough, however, this love is strangely powerful in the sense that it is very difficult for us to end it. Sadly, friendships come to an end, but no matter how estranged we may become from our family, they are still family. We may not talk to them for years, we may be hurt by them, get fed up with them or even downright loathe them, but they are still family and we innately recognize that we have a duty to them. *Storge* love stems from a sense of obligation and duty, whereas *philia* love is less obligatory and can often gives us more of a sense of buy in.

As interesting as each of the loves mentioned above are, they do not speak of the love the Jesus is commanding of us in today scripture reading. The type of love Jesus is talking about is the type of love that you have often heard me refer to as *radically inclusive*. The Greeks call this love *agape* and it means a sacrificial, unconditional love; the kind that is offered without any thought of what one will gain in return. *Agape* love is about giving of ourselves without expecting or wanting anything in return. It means loving other people regardless of whether you like them or whether they love you. Our website and church literature states that, “New Day Worship Center decrees that all people shall have equality of access and opportunity which is

free from discrimination on grounds of gender, sexual orientation, race, age, physical challenge, health status, gender identification, nationality or economic status.” In other words, we accept the call to love and accept *all*.

On the day that Christ was crucified, the Bible tells us that he hung on a cross between two thieves. We are told that the thief on Jesus’ left refused the message of Christ; taunting Jesus and challenging him to get himself down from the cross while the thief on the right accepted Jesus teachings. One of the thieves accepted the forgiveness offered to him by Christ, the other did not. Now listen to this . . . it is *agape* love that made Jesus lay down his life for both thieves, not just the one who reciprocated the love that Christ offered, but for both of them and for us. One of them didn’t want to accept what was offered by Jesus and yet Christ died for him, as well, with no thought as to what would be gained in return. It is this last form of love, *agape* love that Jesus command us to have for one another.

Jesus commands us to love one another. So how do we do this? First we must recognize that love is different than liking. We generally like people because we have made some positive connection with them. It is very easy for us to do things, even things that inconvenience us, for those we like. *Agape* love, however, is different from liking. Love is commanded of us regardless of whether or not we like them. It is about serving each other, going out of our way for one another; putting ourselves out, if you will. *Agape* love is about supporting and encouraging one another during both good times and bad; all regardless of whether or not we like each other.

Second, we must recognize that love is often tough. As your pastor and as an educator I often find myself having to be stern, and I have to admit that this kind of love can be very disturbing for me. By nature, I am a people pleaser, but making everyone happy all of the time is

not only impossible, it's not realistic and it's not showing love. I have recently come to the realization that giving advice can be dangerous because how I might deal with a particular situation may not be the appropriate way for any of you to deal with that situation. However, by offering options accompanied by encouragement and love – even tough love – empowers those around me with the tools needed to make wise decisions; not my decisions but their own.

Lastly we must recognize that we are called to love everyone – no really, everyone! I would imagine that this realization may sound strange to many; especially that who come from strong Christian traditions which are very content to condemn the world and to play as small a part in non-Christian culture as possible. We are not called to remove ourselves from the world in which we live, but rather we are called to love it. The gospel of John tells us that God so loved the world that God sent his only Son to the world. Loving the world with *agape* love does not mean being conformed to it, but we do have a responsibility to embrace the world and to serve the world. We are called to tell it like it is and to change it. *Agape* love motivates us to social justice, to bring in our change offerings in the hopes of making a better life for those we have never met and those we will never meet, even those who may not share the same faith as us. *Agape* love motivates us to serve, to challenge one another to give and serve those not only within our church, but those we encounter throughout our daily lives.

Our scripture reading reminds us that it is through the carrying out of *agape* love that we will be known. “By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another.” (v. 35). As you move throughout the week to come may you be reminded that this is a great big world we live in, but that does not prevent us from making a difference. We are called to serve others and to love one another. I can't help but think of the words of Michael Jackson's song,

We Are the World when I think about *agape* love, so I close with just a few words from that song.

There comes a time, when we heed a certain call,

When the world must come together as one.

There are people dying and it's time to lend a hand to life,

The greatest gift of all . . .

We are the world, we are the children

We are the ones who make a brighter day, so let's start giving.

There's a choice we're making, we're saving our own lives.

It's true we'll make a better day, just you and me.

May there fire be in our whole being - in our legs and in our feet, enabling us to walk the earth with reverence and care; so that we may walk in the ways of goodness and truth and be guided by a love that commands us to serve. Amen.