

SERMON TEXT FOR MAUNDY THURSDAY

PREACHED APRIL 13, 2017 AT ZION LUTHERAN, ENOLA PA

TEXTS: John 13.1-17, 31b-35; Exodus 12.1-14; Psalm 116.1-2, 12-19; 1 Corinthians 11.23-26

In the midst of his last meal with his disciples, Jesus' offers these words, *"I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another."*

These words tell us a great deal about the kind of love Jesus is talking about. This surely isn't **romantic** love. It's not simply **being nice** to others. And it's not just about **loving those who love you back**.

Think about it. When Jesus washed his disciples' feet, **Judas** was there - the very one who **handed him over** to the authorities. Jesus loved him too? You bet. And then there's **Peter**, who promises Jesus, *"I will lay down my life for you."* What does **he** do? Only hours after speaking this promise, Peter denies that he even **knows** Jesus. And the **others** around the table that night? They all **fled in fear** and hid. It was only the **women** disciples who could be found at the scene of Jesus' crucifixion.

So I find it a bit striking that **these** are the words that Jesus leaves with his disciples. I mean, he could have said, "Go out and die with me." Or, "keep the faith." Or, "when I am gone, go out and teach and preach to all the world." Or - well, any **number** of things.

But instead he offered this simple and challenging command: *"love another."* Why? Because this kind of love is the **hallmark** not just of our **Triune God** but also of the **Christian church**. As we sing in that old camp song, "they'll know we are Christians by our love." We Christians will be known not by our **sermons** or our **sacraments** or our **festivals** or our **buildings** or our **music** or our **family values** ... but by our **love**.

Above and beyond Jesus' **command** to love is his **actual act** of love. Jesus goes to the cross to demonstrate that, in fact, *"God so loved the world."* Jesus did not go to the cross to make God **loving**, or to satisfy God's **justice**, or to take on our **punishment**. **Jesus went to the cross to show in word and deed that God is love** and that **we, as God's children, are loved**.

That's what these verses are all about. Jesus reminds us of just how much he loves us so that **we might be empowered to love others** - extending God's love through word and deed, and in this way **love others as Jesus has loved us**.

So whether we succeed or fail in our attempts to love one another this week, yet God in Jesus loves us more than we can possibly imagine. And hearing of this love we are set free and sent forth, once again, to love another.

Now, sometimes this love command seems so **challenging** we assume it's an **ideal** - a **lofty goal** that **none** of us will **ever reach**. Why **do** we find it so hard to love? Or, put differently, **who** do we have the hardest time loving? Is it people who are **different** from us? People who have **hurt** us? People who **see** things differently? **Who?** I think this is a question we don't often **ask** ourselves but probably **should** - particularly in our current political climate where the sides seem so far apart and the hate speech seems to **accelerate** by the day.

When we **do** love others well, what is that like? And, just as much, when we **feel** loved **by** someone – accepted for who we are, valued, forgiven, honored, even cherished – what is **that** like? How does it **change** our lives and how **we treat others?** What might we **learn** from these experiences that can help us share our love with others more **fully?**

Here's the thing: we don't have to do this **perfectly** to do it **meaningfully**. There was **only one perfect human**, only **one perfect love**, and **he died on a cross out of love for us**. So even when we **struggle** to love – often for **compelling** reasons – God continues to love us and work through our lives to bless the world that God has created and continues to sustain.

Jesus' death and resurrection not only serves as an example of how to love, but actually frees us and empowers us to love. On the one hand we are freed from the selfish and stifling power of our sinful self. Our sins were crucified with Christ, so we are freed to be the person we were **designed** to be, freed to **care** for God and each other.

On the other hand we are **empowered** to love. We were **raised with Christ**, and through his indwelling presence we are compelled to love as he loved. His character of love resides within us, shaping us toward love.

As I said, **we will never love perfectly**. There will be times - **more often** than we'd probably like to **admit** - when love and compassion are in **short supply**. But whether we **succeed** or **fail** in our attempts to love one another, know that **God loves us more than we can possibly imagine**. And **knowing** this truth, we are set free and sent forth, once again, to **love one another as God loves us**. AMEN