

# WORSHIP

Sermon | 8.9.2020



**Beloved of God**

**The Reverend Anna Dickson**

John 13:31-35

We continue this morning our series on Love. In the first week, Lorenzo helped us to explore what it means that God so loves the world. Last week, Pen reminded us that love is more than just a feeling of affection for someone, but is, rather, an act of the will based on a previous decision - that to love the way Jesus loves is to commit ourselves to their well-being.

This morning's gospel lesson improvises on the theme, and comes from John, chapter 13, verses 31-35. Jesus has just shared his last meal with his disciples and washed their feet. Listen with me for the word of the Lord:

“When he had gone out, Jesus said, ‘Now the Son of Man has been glorified, and God has been glorified in him. If God has been glorified in him, God will also glorify him in himself and will glorify him at once. Little children, I am with you only a little longer. You will look for me; and as I said to the Jews so now I say to you, “Where I am going, you cannot come.”’

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.”



Here ends our reading. This is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

And again let us pray.

O God, we lay our lives open before this, your Word, that it might take root in us, and change us for the living of these days, and for the sake of your glory. Amen.

I got a chuckle this week, albeit one that only fellow Bible nerds will share, from a meme I saw floating around social media. It's a picture of Jesus, presumably delivering the sermon on the mount, maybe he's just teaching, but in any case, he's surrounded by his disciples in a rocky place with his hand held high, and in the bold black type over-laying the image we are told that he is saying, "Okay, everybody, listen carefully. I don't want to end up with four versions of this!"

The joke, of course, is that that is exactly what we have ended up with. Four versions of the story, four ways of telling about Jesus' life and what was important about it, what power it held for the people, for us. Four versions - gospels - that don't always follow the same sequence, that don't all include the same stories, the same language, the same salient details. This has been a stumbling block for some along the way, who have sought to try on the faith of Jesus, and whether following him is a feasible way of life, but for others, these different versions have brought a richness and a depth to the story of Jesus that we would have otherwise missed.

One way to think about this is to think for a minute about the handful of seminal stories that make up your own family's lore, the ones that are repeated over and over again, that paint the picture of the tribe to which you belong, and help you understand who you are in it. The year dad burned the turkey and you ate scrambled eggs for Thanksgiving dinner, the year the Christmas tree kept falling



over until mom - having grown tired of picking up broken ornaments - hired the neighbor kid to come and rope that thing into place. The stories of what happened when the vacation went awry and how and why and who was responsible for it, the stories triumph and defeat, the birth stories, the death stories. Depending on the teller, you might get a different version, based on that person's own place in the story, and the details that stuck out to them. And yet, each re-telling lends itself to the truth, helping us to remember and to understand ourselves as individuals within a larger framework.

When we let the four gospels in our New Testament function that way, we receive two gifts. Not only do we get a richer, more complex picture of Jesus' life and his teachings and the uniquely redemptive nature of his death and resurrection. We also get a richer, more complex picture of what's at stake in the story of Jesus for each writer - what they want their particular community to know about Jesus and what it means to be a part of the family who follows him.

Take the love commandment as an example. The church has served up the love commandment as standard fare through the generations. In the same way it wouldn't be a church potluck without the deviled eggs and Jell-O salad, it wouldn't be Jesus' ethical instruction without this dual call: love God, love others. It's at the heart of the teachings.

In their own distinct styles, Matthew, Mark, and Luke help us both to connect Jesus' teaching to the long tradition of the faith and to see how he intensifies it. From them, we learn that if we want to love God, we've got to love our neighbors - and, of course, we know that Jesus isn't just talking about those with whom we share a proximate address, but all of God's children. Neighbor-love is, perhaps, Jesus' most famous, most widely repeated moral instruction, the ground from which our Golden Rule grew - and, as Pen reminded us last week, it is not just a sentiment, but a decision to answer the call to action: do unto others, he says, as you would have them do unto you. Want for them and their children



what you want for you and yours. Dream for them the dreams you dream for your own life. All the peace and security and flourishing that you desire? Desire it for them.

In other places in those same gospels, Jesus goes even further with this ethic of love, calling us to love, not just our neighbors, but our enemies as well. In the Sermon on the Mount, those who wish to follow Jesus are told that it consists in loving not just those who love you back, but those who oppose you at every turn. It consists in praying for those who persecute you, for those who criticize you and root against you, for those you frankly just don't like. Love your enemy as yourself, which is to say, do not predicate your love on an expectation of reciprocity.

John also lifts up this love commandment, but there is something distinct in his articulation of it. In his voice, a fresh detail emerges - one that we've got to slow down enough to hear or else we'll gloss over it the same way a teenager might gloss over her mother's predictable, repeated reminders. John wants us to know that we are helpless to answer the call to love one another until we know, somewhere deep within us, that we have been loved by God in Jesus Christ.

"I give you a new commandment," Jesus says, "that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another."

I have loved you, he says. Did you hear that? I have loved you. I wonder if the words caught in Jesus' throat as he spoke them, ensnared by the emotion of the moment. It is his last night with his disciples, and here between washing their feet, and launching into what scholars call his "Final Discourse," as he anticipates their grief and his, Jesus stops, and he assures them of his love - indeed, that his whole life has been a demonstration of it. I have loved you, Jesus says.



For John, we can only “love God and love others” when we know ourselves to be loved. He wrote as one who knew himself to be loved by Jesus, who knew how powerful, and powerfully freeing, that experience really is. And he wants us to understand that the life of faith begins in the knowledge of our own belovedness. That’s the detail he doesn’t want us to miss - and until we let ourselves stop, and let that good news sink in - until we let the ripple of Jesus’ words, I have loved you, wash over and heal our hearts and calm our minds, we will inevitably wear ourselves out trying to prove that it is so.

I can say with some confidence that I am not the only one who has missed baptisms these last few months, not just because of the cuteness of the babies - although, Bowen Austin, you are pretty darn cute - but because the sacrament makes visible the heart of John’s faith: we love, because God first loved us. It is an occasion to pause and remember what comes first - for him, and for us all.

But there is something else at work in this baptism, as it is in the text. In this little one’s baptism, we not only affirm his primary identity as “beloved of God,” but we affirm that we have been called to help him know what that means - by loving him and one another, the way we have been loved. And there is our shared call, our charge: it is to be a community who shares its life the way Jesus shared his. It is to be people, who in our living embody the love of God for the sake of the other, who translate what might otherwise stay conceptual and abstract into something he can see and feel and recognize and participate in, a love that is as real as the water that is now drying on his brow.

Father Michael Renninger, who is the pastor of St. Mary’s Catholic Church in Richmond, Virginia tells the story of stopping to visit his grandparents on his way home from college. They lived in the same row house in Philadelphia he had known growing up and he knew the way like the back of his hand. He didn’t call ahead. Renninger says that his grandfather had had a series of strokes that had left him paralyzed on one side and unable to talk or swallow. And his



grandmother determined to take care of him at home, even though he required a feeding tube.

On that day, Renninger recalled, he opened the squeaky front door and immediately knew things were not right. The goopy liquid food was splattered all over his grandfather, whose face was red. His grandmother was struggling to care for him when she realized their grandson had entered the house. The college student started to leave, assuming that the most loving thing to do was to avoid walking into this embarrassing situation.

But then he heard his grandmother's gentle voice grab him as if by the scruff. "Don't you dare. Don't you dare leave," she said. "Sometimes this is what love looks like."

Beloved of God, if you are wondering in these difficult days what it means to be a follower of Jesus, if you are looking to share your faith with the world that God so loves, let the knowledge of God's love for you be the source from which everything else flows. Be loved by God, and then love others, sharing your life with them, so that they one day, too, might say, "Oh, I see it now. This is what love looks like."

To God be the glory, now and forevermore. Amen.

