

## A new commandment”

John 13:31-35 (May 15, 2022)

by Paul Matheson

From the image on this morning’s bulletin cover you might well imagine that today is Valentine’s Day – what with the bright red heart and all. It’s *not*, of course. That was back in February.

I have to confess, there’s something about Valentine’s Day that has never entirely appealed to me. All this romanticism! Have I told you about when I proposed to Lindsay?



It was all set to happen one weekend when I was back home from university. Until I realized it was Valentine’s Day. And I said to myself, “I can’t do this. It’s just too schmalzy, too romantic. I’ll have to wait till next weekend. So I did. The anniversary of our engagement is always celebrated one week *after* Valentine’s Day.

You may wonder why Lindsay would marry a guy like me! Some days I wonder that too. I think I’ve grown more sentimental as the years have passed. I’ve softened. And that’s all for the good. I’ve learned it’s entirely appropriate to express tender emotion, affection, desire. These are all a good and wondrous part of our human living.

As for the bulletin cover: In today’s Gospel reading Jesus tells us to love. “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.”



A new commandment that’s all about love. Not *just* a schmalzy kind of love. But we’ll get to that in due course.

What strikes me first is the idea that this commandment should somehow be called *new*. Because surely it wasn’t anything new for the disciples. And for us? Well you must have heard this a hundred times before.

This commandment is as old as the ages. Leviticus chapter 19, verse 18: “You shall love your neighbour as yourself.” It’s one of those commandments God gave to the Hebrew people through Moses all those years ago.

In the First Letter of John, the writer says, “Beloved, I am writing you no new commandment, but an *old* commandment that you have had from the beginning ... Whoever loves a brother or sister lives in the light, and in such a person there is no cause for stumbling.” (1 Jn. 2:7-9)



So ... a new commandment? Well *not* new, if you mean never heard before. But new in other ways, I suppose. New in the sense that some commandments are actually *timeless*. They’re not culturally conditioned. They’re always relevant. They don’t grow old or dusty or out of date. They’re as new today as ever.



Consider the context of this saying. **Last Supper** Here, in the 13th chapter of John, Jesus has shared the last supper with his disciples. He's washed their feet, broken bread with them – even with Judas, the one who would betray him. Jesus knows his time is coming to an end. “Little children, I am with you only a little longer. ... And where I am going you cannot come.”



Can you hear the sorrow in his voice? He's going to leave this world he loves by way of the cross, and return to his heavenly Father. But here's what I want to leave with you, Jesus says. If there's one thing I want you to remember, it's this: *love one another*.

It's important for us to hear that, because we so easily forget what Jesus was all about. Our memories are short. And before you know it we turn discipleship into something very different than what it was ever intended to be.

We get sidetracked. Drawn into controversies and entanglements. We fight great battles over fine points of doctrine. We stand for this *cause* or that. And we forget the most important thing.

You know this *is* the most important thing – don't you? Have you ever heard of someone leaving church because they found too much love there? No, I didn't think so. Love is the *centrepiece* of the gospel.

What was it the apostle Paul said? (I want you to see that this message of love is everywhere!) “If I speak in the tongues of mortals and of angels, but do not have” ... what? ... “*love*, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal.” A big noise. A garish show of religiosity.



“If I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains ...” When's the last time *you* moved a mountain? That would certainly be impressive! “But if I do not have love, I am nothing.”



Writing in the early second century, an Athenian philosopher (and Christian apologist) named Aristides described the fledgling Christian movement to the Roman emperor. Listen to this lengthy description, and see if it fits with who *you* know the Christian community to be:

He says, “It is the Christians, O Emperor, who have sought and found the truth, for they acknowledge God. They do not keep for themselves the goods entrusted to them. They do not covet what belongs to others. They show love to their neighbours.

“They do not do to another what they would not wish to have done to themselves. They speak gently to those who oppress them, and in this way they make them their friends. It has become their passion to do good to their enemies.

“They live in the awareness of their smallness. Every one of them who has anything gives ungrudgingly to the one who has nothing. If they see a travelling stranger, they bring him under their roof. They rejoice over him as over a real brother, for they do not call one another brothers after the flesh, but they know they are brothers in the Spirit and in God.



“If they hear that one of them is imprisoned or oppressed for the sake of Christ, they take care of all his needs. If possible they set him free.

“If anyone among them is poor or comes into want while they themselves have nothing to spare, they fast two or three days for him. In this way they can supply any poor man with the food he needs. This, O Emperor, is the rule of life of the Christians, and this is their manner of life.”<sup>1</sup>

See what I mean about this kind of love not being schmaltzy? It goes far beyond sentiment. It's love in *action*. Sacrificial love that propels us to kindness and compassion and goodness toward our neighbour.



Love one another. But this love is hard – when it comes down to the nitty-gritty of life. And the people we have to deal with, and the ambiguous situations we face, and the decisions we have to make. With difficult family members, and troublesome neighbours. And folks at church we just don't see eye to eye with. And people in the world with whom we have little in common.

Lord knows it isn't easy to love! Any more than it was for Jesus to love Judas, his betrayer. And Peter, who was soon to deny him. And the Roman soldiers bearing arms against him. And crowds calling for his crucifixion. And unprincipled authorities willing to condemn him.



“Love one another,” he says, “as I have loved you.” I guess that's one of the new things about this commandment. The fact that it points to Jesus – a real life, flesh and blood example of what it means to love.

If you ever find yourself in a hard place and you want to know how to love a person, just ask yourself how Jesus would do it. It may not make things any easier. But it could help to clarify what love might look like.

What might Jesus do, if he were here? It's not just love in theory, love as some abstract principle to be applied. Rather it's love with a *human face*. Love that we've seen and known. Love that came to dwell, and still comes among us, in the person of Jesus.



The writer of 1st John puts it like this: “Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God; everyone who loves is born of God and knows God.”

“No one has ever seen God;” he continues. But “if we love one another, God *abides* in us, and his love is perfected in us.”

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<sup>1</sup> – Aristides 137 AD, taken from *Jesus for President*, by Shane Claiborne and Chris Haws, p.232. <https://thesimplepastor.co.uk/aristides-on-christians/>, Accessed May 13, 2022.

The love of God became *incarnate* in the person of Jesus. And this love *continues* to be embodied in the lives of God's people. New Testament scholar Raymond Brown says: "As long as Christian love is in the world, the world still encounters Jesus." The world encounters him through us!

This is not our doing. It's a gift, an *impossible* gift, that comes from beyond our human capacity. God, our Creator, is the *source* of all love. And as we open ourselves to the life of God, that divine quality of love becomes part of who we are.



You can never love anyone if you've never been loved yourself. And the Gospel of Jesus is that we are loved. In the very depths of our being. Loved without pre-conditions. Loved forever and always. And that is the greatest gift of all!

As God's love permeates our lives, as it saturates our souls, as it melts our hearts and glistens in our eyes, as it reaches out through our hands, and inhabits our homes and churches and neighbourhoods – that is when this commandment of Jesus finds fulfillment.

"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."

Is there someone you are being called to love this day? Take a moment and consider that. Who could be on the horizon of your life, who needs to know you love them? Is it a friend, a spouse, a child, a neighbour? Will there be an opportunity this week for you to do that, for you to tell them, or show them?

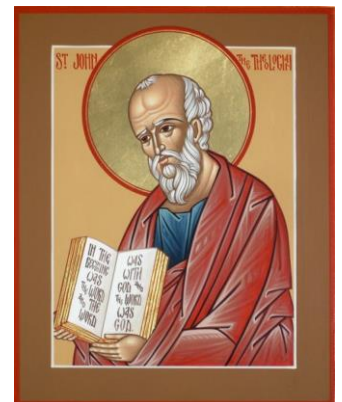


The 4th-century theologian Jerome tells a story about the Apostle John at the end of his life. John was old and frail, unable to walk. It's rumoured he lived to the age of 104! So his disciples would carry him into the gathering of believers on the Lord's Day.

Every week these were his words to the congregation: "Little children, love one another." This went on week after week, until at last, weary of the repetition, John's disciples asked, "Master, why do you *always* say this?"

"Because," he replied, "it is the Lord's command, and if *this only* is done, it is enough."<sup>2</sup>

There's no way to verify whether this tradition is true. But it surely fits with what we know from the writings of John. I can just imagine this wizened old man, carried about by others, having served his Lord all these years. Now, at the end of his life, they bring him into the congregation at Ephesus, every Sunday.



He raises a bony finger, looks around, and repeats in a raspy voice his one-lined sermon (which is really *Jesus'* sermon, well-remembered by a wise old friend): "Little children, love one another."

<sup>2</sup> Michael Pahl, <https://michaelpahl.com/2017/05/08/love-is-enough/>, Accessed May 13, 2022.

Now if only we did that! Would it be enough? Would we have fulfilled the Lord's desire for our lives? The answer, says John, is yes!

"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." May it be so! Amen.