

John 13: 31-35: Jesus said, “Now the Son of Man has been glorified, and God has been glorified in him. ³² If God has been glorified in him,^[a] God will also glorify him in himself and will glorify him at once. ³³ 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.’ ³⁴ I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. ³⁵ By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.”

Usually, I preach from something called the lectionary which, if you’re not familiar, is a list of readings – an Old Testament, a Psalm, a gospel, and a New Testament reading – that Christians all over the world use. It repeats on a three year cycle, so the idea is that while you won’t read every part of the Bible, if you come to church for three years, you’ll hear most of the stories in our Scripture.

The last several weeks, the lectionary gospel reading has been stories of the disciples seeing Jesus after the resurrection, but this week, the lectionary takes us back in the gospel of John before the resurrection. In fact, it’s the night before Jesus would be arrested and then crucified. He’s with the disciples for the last supper and there gives them a new commandment, “Love one another as I have loved you.” It’s almost like the lectionary wants to remind us why the resurrection is so important, why it matters. If you were here for the Maundy Thursday service, you heard this exact same Scripture. The lectionary has us read the same Scripture, preach on the same Scripture 2 times in less than a month. And that’s intentional, but it’s not very common. In fact, I can’t find another example where the lectionary uses the same Scripture in such close proximity. One of the main points of the lectionary is for us to be able to hear diverse and different passages throughout the year. But this passage is so important, that we get it twice in the matter of weeks. And I think there’s a pretty simple explanation for that – the gospel is all about love. Full stop. Period. It’s about God’s love for us shown in Jesus and about how our response to that love is to share that same love with all we encounter – to friend and enemy alike.

Today on confirmation Sunday, we’re celebrating that this group of young people are choosing for themselves to continue their faith journey, to continue exploring what it means to be a Christian. And while on one level there’s so many answers to that question – answer around what we believe, what rituals we participate in, what questions we ask. But on another level, we can sum it up in a fairly simple and straightforward way – being a Christian means we are supposed to love like Jesus loved.

Soon after Jesus tells the disciples to love one another, he demonstrates his greatest act of love – he chooses to accept suffering and death for us. And that seems like something almost impossible to follow. If that’s the hallmark of what it means to be a Christian, I’m not sure any of us would feel that we measure up. But the context of Jesus telling the disciples to love one another is not what follows -- the crucifixion, but rather it is what comes before when Jesus washed the disciples feet. Now don’t get me wrong, the fact that Jesus was willing to die is an extreme example of love. The fact that from the cross, he looked down upon those who

crucified him and forgave them is extraordinary love. But the commandment he gave – love one another as I have loved you wasn't given on the cross, rather it was given after he washed feet.

Washing feet was not something that was unique to Jesus. Every host would offer guests the opportunity to wash their feet. It was an act of hospitality that was a part of the people's daily life. It was as common as offering someone something to drink would be for us. But Jesus changed it up in one key way. While every guest would be invited to have their feet washed when they came into someone else's house, the person who actually did the washing would have been the person considered the lowest. If the family was wealthy enough to have servants, then a servant would wash the person's feet. If the family did not have servants, then whoever was lowest on the social hierarchy would do the job. But this is where Jesus broke custom. Rather than asking one of his followers to wash everyone's feet, he did it himself. He took on the role of the servant, the role of the one considered lowest and least.

It was this example, not the cross, that Jesus used to teach them what it meant to love others. And I think the message Jesus sent was simply this: none of us are too good, or too important to serve others. And while the cross is love at its most profound, love is usually manifest not in one time big moments, but in daily acts of kindness and service. There are many qualities we think of when we think of Jesus – loving, forgiving, charismatic – but I think the one attribute that we maybe overlook is that Jesus was exceptionally kind and gentle. We see this not only in washing the disciples' feet, but in stories where he would always look to welcome those who were excluded, in the story where he invited the children to come to him when the disciples didn't want to be bothered by them, in the way he responded to those who were deemed to be sinners not with words of judgment but by inviting himself over to their house.

I don't think it's an overstatement to that Jesus primarily drew people to himself because he treated them with kindness. Levi, the tax collector became his disciple when Jesus went over to his house for a dinner party. Mary Magdalene became his follower when he looked upon her not as a demon possessed woman but with compassion and healed her. Jesus drew people to himself and literally saved lives by being kind. A few years ago, I read a story on CNN about Kevin Hines, someone who in the early 2000's nearly died by suicide jumping off the Golden Gate bridge, but he survived. Now, he's an advocate for suicide prevention and in telling his story, he says that he walked to the bus stop, took it to the Golden Gate, and walked half way across and finally jumped. He said that he had made up his mind that if even one person said a kind word to him on the way, then he wouldn't jump. And while he certainly doesn't blame strangers for what he did, he tells that story to illustrate the power of a seemingly small, random act of kindness.

Today, we celebrate the commitment of Avery, Corinne, Emerson, Jason, Juliette, and Kendall to strive to walk in the way of Jesus and we are reminded of our own commitment to that journey. But I also want to say to the confirmands and to all of us gathered here that this commitment is one that often comes with a lot of doubt. There are times when I'm not sure what I believe if I'm being honest. There are times when I admit that the theology of our church

doesn't always make a whole lot of rational sense. What you did today is not going to do away with your times of doubt nor will it answer every question you have.

But what I hope you remember is that your commitment today, the commitment that so many of us have made is, in its most simple form, is a commitment to love each other and to love the people in the community around us. Our greatest calling as followers of Jesus is to not to have the right answers about faith or theology or God or church. Rather, our greatest calling is always to love – to love with great kindness, to always think of others and share in their suffering and celebrate in their joy, to find ways to serve and give of ourselves whether it's with our families, our friends, our co-workers, or even people who in some way or another, may be our enemies. This is what Jesus tells us is the distinguishing mark of all who would follow him.

This, more than anything else, is what it means to be a Christian.

Amen.