

Text: John 13: 31-35
Title: One Little Word
Date: 05.19.19
Roger Allen Nelson

Frederick Buechner tells a delightful story of a children's Christmas pageant. As the gospel was read and the carols were sung, the chancel filled up with nativity characters: Joseph in a cotton-ball-beard, shepherds in bathrobes, cherubs in tinsel, cows and sheep and wise men and....

And when the pageant reached its zenith the whole cast gathered around the manger to sing out, "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will among men."

But the chancel was too small for the gathering crowd and there was a good deal of jockeying and jostling for place. The result being that one little girl, about nine years old and smaller than most, was left "so far out on the fringes of things that not even by craning her neck and standing on tiptoe could she see what was going on."

The choir sang on cue, "Glory to God in the highest..." and then in the still momentary pause that followed, the little girl in a voice "shrill with irritation and frustration and enormous sadness at having her view blocked cried out, 'Let Jesus show!'"

There was more to follow, but with the congregation in stunned silence the priest bounced up and pronounced the benediction. With that cry still echoing in the sanctuary he sent the congregation out into the night. "Let Jesus show!"

The priest later said that it was one of the best things he ever did.

Let Jesus show.

It's what we all want. It is the deep longing that somehow God will break-in to be unmistakably present. It's the hope of the world and the prayer of the Church. It might even be part of what brought you here this morning. Let Jesus show.

So, how do we let Jesus show? Even "shrill with irritation and frustration and enormous sadness," how do we let Jesus show?"

For us,
for those we love,
for the world,
how would Jesus show?
That's our question for the morning.

Our text catches Jesus on his last night with his disciples.

With breadcrumbs in his beard and wine on his breath he has washed their feet; Judas has walked out. And at the close of an intimate meal among friends Jesus launches into his longest sermon or prayer recorded in scripture....

This “Farewell Discourse” is akin to a funeral meditation given by the one dying. With his heart open-wide Jesus prepares his friends for his absence. These few verses are the preamble for what follows. As a way to set the tone, Jesus says that he is giving them “a new commandment.”

A new commandment I give you: Love one another....

I guess Jesus could simply be serving up a helping of rhetorical hyperbole, but this is not a new commandment. In fact, Leviticus 19:18, arguably one of the oldest texts in scripture, reads:

Do not seek revenge or bear a grudge against anyone among your people, but love your neighbor as yourself. I am the Lord.

The command to love is not new. Jesus is not vetting original material. This is familiar territory. It’s said that the love of others is the common thread that runs through all of the great religions of the world. So, why does Jesus call it new? If this is boilerplate religious instruction why call it new?

The answer might swing on one little word: *kathos*, translated here as “as.” Jesus says:

A new commandment I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another.

Jesus instructs his followers to love as they’ve seen or experienced in him.

The model is not vague ideal or common practice.

The guide is not Moses, Abraham, David, or your knuckleheaded neighbor.

The archetype is Jesus.

The one who called them,
the one who washed their feet,
the one who is about to be crucified.

Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another.

A couple nuances....

It is worth noting that for John (the gospel writer) the glory of God is on display on the cross. In the other gospels the cross is the humiliation of Jesus; in John the crucifixion is his glorification. So, in these opening lines of his farewell speech Jesus instructs his disciples to love not as the world loves,

not as everyone else loves,
not even as they’ve been instructed to love before,
but as he loves ~ a love that shines brightest in the cross.

John Calvin puts it this way:

The glory of God shines, indeed, in all creatures on high and below, but never more brightly than on the cross, in which there was a wonderful change of things ~ the condemnation of all men was manifested, sin blotted out, salvation restored to men, in short, the whole world was renewed and all things restored to order.

When God's glory is at its brightest, Jesus says, "Love one another, as I have loved you...." This is not love as a feeling, or love as ethereal ideal, but love as self-emptying sacrifice. This is love as God's glory.

Second nuance.

The verb form of "love" here is not a command to commence loving. Jesus is not demanding that they start doing something new, but that they continue doing what they are already doing. In the absence of Jesus ~ carrying on loving.

The source of love is God,
the model of love is Jesus on the cross,
the byproduct of love is that others will know that they are Jesus' disciples.
In the words of the old campfire song, "they will know we are Christians by our love."

Dear friends, from my vantage point I see the fringes of Hope folks continuing to love one another in prayers, meals, calls, cards, helping, listening, serving, quilting, giving, sacrificing, driving, grieving, building, fixing, and wading together through life's deep waters. Over and over again, there are remarkable faithful expressions of love.
Thanks be to God.

I know that we miss people.
I know that opportunities fall through the cracks.
I know that we get too busy and too self-absorbed.
But, I've also seen the command to love be embodied by what Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. called "the beloved community."

You are the beloved community.
A community that finds it's calling in one little word.
Love as Jesus loved ~ in self-giving sacrifice.

In her new book, "Holy Envy: Finding God in the Faith of Others" Barbara Brown Taylor wrestles with the complexity of a multi-religious world, the demise of the church, and what it means to follow Jesus. At one point in suggesting that the future of the church is smaller and humbler, with less property and fewer clergy pensions, she writes this:

I like a soaring cathedral with a high pulpit and a huge pipe organ as much as the next person, but maybe it is time to swap that out for something that calls a little less attention to itself, something that frees up a little more energy for the

neighbor. When everything else is gone, there is still that: the twinned love of God and neighbor, come to vivid life in the person of Jesus.

Let Jesus show.

There is very little internal tension in a sermon about loving one another. “God, blah, blah, love, blah, blah, Jesus, blah, blah....” It has all the energy of your mother reminding you to cover your mouth when you cough....

And yet, it is what we all long for. And it is how Jesus chose to show. Jesus doesn't leave us with bells and whistles and lightsabers. He leaves us with the instruction to love....

So, can you identify one person – maybe in particular one person who is marginalized or neglected – and can you identify and commit to something or a series of somethings that you can do in loving that person?

What would acceptance and kindness and sacrifice look like in that relationship?
If you set aside self-interest, comfort, and familiarity what would love look like?
If you let Jesus show, what would it look like? Can you set your heart to love that person in concrete ways that don't expect attention or pay-off? Can you love as you have been loved by Jesus?

Let Jesus show.

It's what we're all longing for.

Amen.