

At first, today's Gospel reading, might strike you as a little out of place. These last few Sundays, we've been hearing the testimonies of Jesus' disciples after his resurrection. But, today we jump back to John, chapter thirteen and hear Jesus speaking to his disciples at the Last Supper ...which seems a little bit out of order, now that we're in the Easter Season.

But think about it this way. When Jesus says in verse 33, of today's Gospel, "My dear children, I am with you only a little longer...where I am going you cannot come" ...here Jesus is not only preparing His 12 disciples for his death he is also preparing them, for his Ascension.

But before he ascended, and even before his crucifixion, he shared these very important words with his disciples. And we hear them today, because this is an essential teaching for everyone who lives in the light of Easter.

"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."

Jesus is teaching the twelve, and he is teaching us... that the distinguishing mark of a Christian is that we are a people who are called to "Love."

On the one hand, this is one of Jesus' easiest teachings to understand, and at the same time, it is one of the most difficult. We can all come up with quite a list of words to describe what "Love" is. But the word "love" it can mean so many different things. And it can be used to justify so many things... that aren't truly loving.

So consider this definition that Paul teaches us in 1 Corinthians, chapter 13.

Love is patient Love is kind.
Love is not envious or boastful or proud.
Love is not rude or self-seeking.
Love keeps no record of wrongs.
Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth.
It always protects...it does not take advantage.
Love never fails.

Where do we see love like that?

On earth, we certainly don't see that kind of love lived out perfectly. But we see glimpses of it.

Whenever we are open to God's love working through us...that's when we see it.
Whenever we open ourselves to the work of the Holy Spirit...God pours His love into us.

All the young children in this congregation are watching us. They need to see living examples of God's love. They need to see love, and forgiveness.

They need to see us serving one another with humility and reaching out to those who are unloved.

That's how we learn what love really is.
 We can read about, or hear a sermon about it, but more than anything
 we need to see Christian love being lived out.

Children sure aren't learning it anywhere else.
 They aren't learning about patient, self-giving love from watching TV shows or most movies, right?
 Because most of what is portrayed as love on TV and in movies or in pop songs,
 is a different kind of love, isn't it?

Not that there aren't a few exceptions.
 But predominantly, how would you describe the kind of love that our culture idolizes?
 It's love that is focused on the self... isn't it?
 In fact, most of what is portrayed... is not love... but coveting or lust.

If it was love that patient and kind... we'd see a lot more weddings,
 and fewer bedrooms, wouldn't we?

So on the one hand, the kind of love that Jesus is teaching about is easy to understand
 and at the same time, it's difficult.

On the one hand, it's so simple...it's so true.
 And on the other hand, this teaching often seems to elude us.
 We find it difficult because it's hard to put into practice.

We know what the ideal is.
 We know the kind of Love that God wants us to experience but often we fall short.
 Another name for falling short or missing the mark... is sin.

Our sinful nature often causes us to stumble.
 We get tripped up by our own weakness, or stubbornness, or pride.
 We follow our heart. But sometimes our heart is misguided.

And what we discover, sooner or later, is that God's design
 is the only design that can give us true joy and fulfillment.

Because when we find ourselves getting tripped up by our sinful nature who do we usually hurt?
 We hurt ourselves and we hurt those who are closest to us.

You would think it would be the other way around.
 You would think that the ones we love the most
 ...our closest friends, our closest family member.

They would be the last ones we would ever want to hurt. And yet because of the dynamics of family and
 friendships, when you love someone your lives are interconnected.

Being close to a person, means that you care deeply about that person.
 But if you are close enough to a person to genuinely care about them you are also close enough
 to feel the pain of disappointing or being disappointed by that person.

Parents who love their children sometimes have to say the unpopular word “no.”

It’s like a parent with a toddler who likes to climb.
Climbing is fun but there are some places,
like a bookshelf that my kids used to like to climb, that are dangerous.
Unless we were there to say no, they would’ve been hurt.

And the same is true as children get older.
Parents who love their children, and who trust God’s plans
will continue to draw boundaries for their protection.

A few years ago, I heard a keynote speaker tell the story about a time she struck up a conversation with a man who was sitting next to her on an airplane.

She was flying back from a speaking engagement and as they started visiting he asked her what she did for a living. When he found out that she was a Lutheran pastor, he told her about the time he had been invited to church by a friend who happened to be Lutheran.

“All right!” she thought, “a Lutheran who invited a friend to church.”

But what was remarkable about his visit to church was that it had happened many years ago.
and the man still remembered the sermon he heard that day.
Pretty amazing!

Well, let me tell you what the man remembered.
He remembered the pastor telling a story about Jesus stepping in and saving a woman from getting stoned to death, a woman who had been caught in adultery.

But what really stuck with this man, was the way Jesus had shown great mercy, and great compassion
and yet at the same time he did not bless or condone the behavior.
The Bible tells us that Jesus was full of **mercy** and **truth**.

There is definitely Gospel in this story and there is also law.
The first kind of law we see is the law that her accusers wanted to take into their own hands.

Without considering their own guilt before God, without first considering the log in their own eye
they were quick to declare themselves judge and jury.

But do you remember what Jesus did?
He said to them, “If any one of you is without sin, let him be the first to throw a stone.”

Here, Jesus was pointing out the necessity of first examining our own consciences.
We need to first recognize our own sin.
We have no business delighting in judging another person
while at the same time not being accountable to God for our own sin.
The second thing we learn from this story, is that God’s mercy and truth always go hand in hand.
We see this in the way Jesus spoke to her, after all of her accusers had dropped their stones and gone home.

Jesus said to her, “Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?

No one sir, she said.

Then neither do I condemn you.” Jesus declared. “Go now and leave your life of sin.”¹

These words are both Gospel, incredible mercy and compassion, and Law, God truth that leads to life.

God’s mercy and God’s truth always go hand in hand. They cannot be separated.

There is no such thing as God’s law without mercy.

And there is no such thing as God’s mercy without God’s law, God’ protection, God’s plan for what gives life.

So when Jesus gives us the command to love one another. He is giving us both the Law and the Gospel.

Jesus is reminding us that we are his dearly beloved disciples.

We know what it means to be forgiven and what it means to be called to forgive one another.

We know what it means to be loved. And being loved by God is what empowers us to love one another.

By giving us himself, the source of all love, God also gives us the ability to love one another.

It’s a gift from God.

Have you ever tried to forgive someone with your own willpower?

It doesn’t work very well does it?

But when we rely on the power of Christ living within us...

when trust in the Holy Spirit working within us, that’s when God’s love flows through us most freely.

That’s Jesus prayer for us.

That’s the hope we share as Christians.

In our own strength we stumble,

but in the strength that comes from Christ,

we can reach out with a love that patient and kind,

a love that is not self-seeking.

And by this, by our love, the world will know that we are Jesus’ disciples. Amen.

¹ John 8:11