

## **Sermon for May 19, 2019 “They Will Know Who We Are” John 13: 31-35**

There is a story in Isak Dinesen’s book “Out of Africa” about a boy named Kitau. He appeared at the author’s door one day to ask for a job as a domestic servant. She hired him but was surprised when after three months he asked her for a letter of recommendation to Sheik Ali bin Salim, a Muslim who lived in a nearby town. Dinesen offered to raise Kitau’s pay in order to keep him, but money was not his interest. Kitau had decided to become either a Muslim or a Christian, and his purpose in working for Dinesen had been to see, up close, the way a Christian lived. Now that he had worked for Dinesen and seen the ways of Christians, he would go and observe Sheik Ali to see how Muslims behaved; and then he would decide. The author remembers how she wished Kitau had told her that before he came to live with her.

In our reading from John today, we hear Jesus give his disciples a new commandment. The context for this story is that Jesus and his disciples have gathered in the Upper Room for their Passover meal and Judas has just left them. Jesus knows that his time is short and so he needs to make sure his disciples understand what he has to tell them. He doesn’t speak in parables or riddles this time. He is very, very clear:

“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.”

Notice that Jesus doesn’t tell them “They will know you are my disciples if you believe the right things.”

He didn’t say, “They will know you are my disciples if you wear a cross around your neck or put a fish symbol on the bumper of your car.”

“They will know you are my disciples if you have love for one another.”

It’s about how we behave, how we treat one another, or, as Kitau expressed it – how we live.

Jesus calls this a “new commandment” and yet, it seems very familiar. Way back in Leviticus 19:18 we read, “Love your neighbour as yourself.” This is the basis of the Golden Rule – Treat others as you wish to be treated. What makes this new?

Well, what makes it new is five little words: “...As I have loved you.”

“Just as I have loved you, you must also love one another.”

Jesus isn’t leaving it up to his original group of disciples, or to us, to decide what loving each other looks like. He has already set the example. He has given us the pattern to follow.

And what does this example look like? How did Jesus love his disciples?

He loved them by believing in them. He chose his closest companions from one of the lowliest social positions. He didn't choose Pharisees or Priests of the Temple. He chose fishermen. Men who knew what it was like to do hard physical work to make a living. People who knew firsthand how difficult life was under the rule of Rome with its crushing taxes and unfair laws. And he kept making that choice everywhere he went. He chose to be with people on the margins – lepers, widows, people with mental health issues, the sick and dying. He even chose to spend time with Zacchaeus, a tax collector, someone despised even by the oppressed and poor. In each person he met, he saw worth. With each person he met, he sought relationship – the kind of close relationship that means eating at table together. He was inclusive. He loved them by seeing them – really seeing them.

Jesus loved them by being humble. He didn't look for praise and glory. He didn't put himself above all others. He took the humble stance of a servant, even going so far as to wash the feet of his friends that night.

Jesus loved them in very practical terms. He fed them; he healed the things that were holding them back from living a full life. He didn't use fancy language or academic phrases when he taught; he used parables with illustrations they could understand, stories from their own lives.

Jesus love was inclusive and unconditional; it was practical; it was fired by a sense of social justice. Jesus didn't simply *talk* about the issues facing people on the margins, he dove right in to do something about those issues. He spoke out and put his life on the line in doing so.

That night in the Upper Room, Jesus told his closest followers that he wouldn't be with them for much longer. His message to them that night was a call to action, a call to continue this work after he had gone. His message from the start was one of love in action and he expected the disciples to carry on in the same way.

“Love each other as I have loved you.”

It took the disciples a little while to get their heads around this, I think. At first some denied even knowing him. They hid away, gathered together in a room. I'm sure they were terrified after everything that had happened to their leader was going to happen to them as well.

They didn't scatter to the four winds, however, as many might have done. In fact, this was really what the Sanhedrin were expecting they would do... Eliminate the leader and the group will not survive... But, in the end, this wasn't the case. Jesus had taught them well. Jesus had instilled in them – by his own example – the love for others, the social awareness, and the courage to stand up for what was good and right for all people. There was no way that they could have spent all this time with him and gone back to being simple fishermen. They couldn't un-see what he had shown them. They couldn't unlearn what Jesus had taught them. They couldn't stand quietly by and let the oppression continue – for themselves or for those around

them. It wasn't just the words and actions of Jesus that had entered their minds, but the very Spirit of his passion for making the world a different place. There was still much work to be done. What Jesus had begun was not finished.

The kind of radical, transformational change that Jesus was looking for doesn't happen overnight. It doesn't happen in one lifetime... and, Lord knows, when we look around the world today, it hasn't happened yet.

“Love one another as I have loved you.”

Not just for a day, not just for a decade, but long enough that it becomes your normal way of doing things. Long enough that others emulate that behaviour. Long enough that there are so many people living out this love that it becomes the norm for our society. Long enough that it becomes the way of being for all people in all the world.

This is the kind of transformation that I believe Jesus dreamed for this world. Yes, his earthly life was cut short way too soon and we will never know what influence he might have had, had he been able to continue his mission into old age – but I believe he knew that the work would not be finished in his lifetime, that this kind of transformation *could* not possibly happen that quickly.

And so he leaves his disciples, and all of his followers to continue this work throughout the ages.

He leaves this commission to us.

“Love one another as I have loved you.”

Somewhere along the years, I think we have forgotten this. We have turned being “Followers of the Way” - which is how the early Christians were known – into a religion that gets caught up on the specifics of beliefs, on rituals, on moral purity, and theological knowledge. It has become complicated to be a Christian.

When I read the stories and teachings of Jesus, when I look at his actions, I don't think he meant for it to be complicated at all:

Love one another the way I have loved you. This is how people will know that you are my followers – that you love one another.

Pretty simple message – not necessarily an easy one to carry out, but one that is easy to understand.

For the past nine months, I have been working as a chaplain with the Ottawa West End Community Chaplaincy. This has filled my field placement requirement in my studies for

diaconal ministry. We don't have a door with a sign that says "Chaplain", in fact we don't have an office at all. I have spent my time in several neighbourhoods in the west end of Ottawa. I talk to people who are coming to use the Food Banks, I have coffee with a group of women, many of them newcomers to Canada, who live in subsidized housing, I help children with a literacy program, I help cook and serve community meals, I hold babies and I carry groceries, and most of all I listen.

I don't wear a clergy collar... I don't even wear a nametag that identifies me as a chaplain or a Christian for that matter. Some of the people I interact with know that I am a minister in a Christian church but most have no idea. Even if they have heard that I am a chaplain, many don't know what that means.

One of the questions my learning facilitator and I have explored this year is this:

What is the difference between what I do as a chaplain and what the social workers do who are hired by the city to work in these community houses?

Well, here I am nearing the end of this placement and I still don't have a clear answer. Maybe that's because there really isn't a difference in what we do. The difference is rather in why we do it. I think both social workers and chaplains are drawn to this kind of work because of a deep sense of social justice. I think we both care deeply about the people in the communities we serve. I think we both want to advocate for changes that preserve the dignity of people living in poverty. I think we both want to help people find the resources they need both from the social service network and from inside themselves to overcome the many struggles they face. For both the social worker and the chaplain there is a sense of calling, I think. We are both called in some way to do this work. The difference, perhaps, is that for me that calling comes from my relationship with Jesus, my relationship with God.

In the end does it matter if anyone else knows this about me? Do I need to wear some sort of outward sign that tells the world that I am a Christian?

Jesus tells us, "This is how people will know you are my followers – that you love one another."

I know this – and you know this – and I don't think we need a flashy sign to let the world know this.

In her book, "The Spiral Staircase", theologian Karen Armstrong says "Religion is not about having to believe or accept certain difficult propositions; instead religion is about doing things that change you."

She is talking about practice – the same message Jesus gave his disciples. When it comes down to it, what we do is more important than what we believe. It's what we do that makes a difference. I'm not saying that beliefs aren't important, but I think they are a very personal thing. I think we all struggle with what we believe throughout our lives – and it helps to have a

community where you can work on that together – a community where we learn and listen and share our thinking – a community where we figure it all out together.

But what is the point of believing if it doesn't make a difference – a difference in our own lives and in the lives of others. What I hear Jesus saying is that turning that thinking into action is what transforms the world – and, as followers of Jesus, as believers in Jesus - that thinking and action need to be manifested in actions of love for one another.

There was a hymn in one of our earlier hymnbooks called “We are One in the Spirit”. Its chorus says They will know we are Christians by our love, by our love. They will know we are Christians by our love.

Do they know who we are?

Love one another as Jesus loved... and they will.

Amen