

## Get the Message?

John 13:31-35

Crossroads Christian Church

Acts 11:1-18

April 24, 2013

Easter 5 C

We are called to live an Easter faith in a Good Friday world. It's easy to get discouraged in a Good Friday world. It's a world where young men get radicalized and blow themselves up in public marketplaces to kill people they think are heretics. It's a world where people decide to go out in a blaze of violence by shooting up schools or theatres. It's a world where drugs are rampant. It's a world where the poor keep getting poorer and the rich keep getting richer. It's a world where people. It's a world of earthquakes in Japan and Ecuador, flooding in Houston, and ongoing warfare in the Near East. It's a Good Friday kind of world where truth and love ever seem to be nailed to the cross.

Yet in all that darkness candles of light and love still shine. First responders still put their lives on the line to protect others. Volunteers still go to dangerous places to put out fires or to sandbag against river flooding.

Today's gospel lesson from John 13 is set in a Good Friday world. It is sandwiched between Jesus predicting Judas's betrayal and Peter's denial. It is set in the Upper Room and begins after the foot washing, where Jesus told the disciples to follow his example and be humble servants, and after Judas left the room to go and betray him. With what was left of his closest friends, Jesus tried to explain one more time just what it was all about. "My children," he started—the word's only used twice in John's gospel—it's a term of informal endearment. We could translate it "my dear children," or even, "hey, kids." He explained to them again that he was going to go away to a place where they could not follow. Do you remember times when as a mother you had to say, or as a child you had to hear, "I'm going away for awhile," and how heart-broken it made you feel? Remember the separation anxiety, the tears, the denial, "no, mommy, don't go." The disciples must have felt that way. Go? How could Jesus go? He was the center of their lives. Would they see him again? How could they manage without him?

Then Jesus said, "Let me give you a new command: Love one another. In the same way I loved you, you love one another. This is how everyone will recognize that you are my disciples—when they see the love you have for each other." (Message) You may remember the song, "They'll know we are Christians by our love." That's where it comes from—Jesus telling his disciples to be conspicuous for their

love—to let their love stand out, to shine as a light in a dreary world. You know how when you see brown uniforms and brown trucks you think of UPS, when you see golden arches you think of McDonalds, when you see the peacock you think of NBC? When you see people acting in love, you should see the logo of a Christian, the sign of a disciple. Get the message?

Why should Jesus give them that commandment? Partly it was survival. They would need each other's love and support to make it through the terrible trials ahead. We need that love in Christian community today to make it through our daily trials. But there's more to it than that. Jesus reminding the disciples to love one another is asking them to be consistent with the true nature of God. Earlier in John's gospel came the gospel within a gospel, "For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten son." Later, in John's first letter, he would say, "My beloved friends, let us continue to love each other, since love comes from God. Everyone who loves is born of God and experiences a relationship with God. The person who refuses to love doesn't know the first thing about God, because God is love." (Msg) Get the message?

There's an ancient story that John the Evangelist, author of the Gospel and letters of John, preached in Ephesus well into his 90s. He was so feeble that he had to be carried into worship on a stretcher. He would preach as long as he had strength, and would end up saying, "little children, love one another." Then he'd be carried home. Each week was the same message, "little children, love one another." Finally, someone asked, "Master, why do you always say this?"

"Because," John replied, "it is the Lord's command, and if this only is done, it is enough." Get the message?

So, by being Easter people in a Good Friday world, we're called to love not just to survive, but because by loving we participate in the very nature of God. Love should be our trademark, our logo. Love should be the way we tear down the barriers that divide us from each other and from God.

Can you tell we are Christians by our love? It's easier to love people who are just like us—same race, same class, same family, same pew—but how do we reach out in love to people who make us uncomfortable? How do we live out God's love to people who are different from us? Maybe it's at our very discomfort zones where God is calling us to grow.

God's love holds on and never, never lets go. That's how deep it is.

How wide is God's love? Our reading from Acts gives us a clue. Peter, like all the disciples, was first a good Jew, and he tried from birth to follow the Jewish laws. Following the laws was their way, Peter's way, to honor God, to be pure, to be holy. But there was a whole world out there, not just Jews, who needed to hear the good news of what God had done in Jesus Christ. Peter was at Joppa, a seaside city with people from different races and cultures, when he had a vision—God sent down from heaven a buffet table—actually it was a big sheet—and in it were all sorts of animals that it was forbidden for Jews to eat. God said, "Go ahead. Kill something and cook it up for dinner." Peter said, "God forbid!" But it was God doing the suggesting. "These are unclean!" Peter cried. "What I have made clean, don't you call unclean," God said. Then it was clear. God wasn't talking about what should be on the menu, but who Peter needed to bring the gospel to—a Gentile, an "unclean" person. It was a breathtaking, frightening, overwhelming moment. Peter had to put aside his "us and them" mentality to carry the gospel where God wanted it to go. Peter had to stop squirming and get on with it, and accept people he had grown up thinking as unacceptable.

This vision is so significant, because it dramatically led the church from being a Jewish sect to become a faith for all people. It helped expand the apostles' understanding that God's love is for everybody, not just for those who are ritually pure. We almost instinctively find ways to separate ourselves from one another, like Peter did—in and out, white, black and brown, straight and gay, conservative and liberal, American and foreigners, good people and sinners. And God tells us that we're all God's children; that we're all loved by God. In a Good Friday kind of world, where death seems to have the last word, we have an Easter faith where life and love shine in the darkness with a light that can never die. We are the Easter people. Get the message?

Thom Schuman puts it like this in a poem called:

marching orders

i could step

over the homeless woman

sleeping on the sidewalk,

or i could

lift her to her feet, embracing her as my sister,

as you have . . .

i could continue

to carry that grudge in my heart, letting

it rub blisters all over my soul,

or i could forgive that person  
who gave it to me so long ago,  
as you have . . .

i could keep a list  
of all those who step out of line, not  
heeding all the rules  
carved into stone  
weathered by time,  
or i could  
invite everyone to join hands,  
dancing in that circle  
where all are welcome  
just as they are,

as you have . . . <sup>1</sup>  
Amen. Get the message?

by Michael E. Dixon

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<sup>1</sup> (c) 2013 Thom M. Shuman, quoted on midrash.org.