

Just As I Have Loved You

**The following sermon was given at Christ Church Cathedral, by the Dean,
the Very Rev. James A. Diamond, on Sunday, May 6, 2007.**

Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another.

I am going to speak to you this morning on one verse of the gospel lesson, verse thirty five of the thirteenth chapter of the Gospel of John, the very last verse. But I first want to set this verse in the context of the Gospel of John. Chapter thirteen in John outlines John's interpretation of Jesus' teachings on the meaning of discipleship. The chapter begins with a demonstration of love that Peter does not understand, foot washing. Peter refuses initially to participate in it though it is, of course, a demonstration of love. And the chapter concludes with Jesus' departure which Peter protests. I will go anywhere with you; lay down my life for you. Jesus turns to Peter and says, before the cock crows you will deny me three times.

Between these two stories of love is the thirty first verse of the thirteenth chapter which gives us a perspective on Jesus' understanding of discipleship that is quite distinct from the synoptic gospels, that is Matthew, Mark and Luke. *Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another.* In John's rendering of Jesus' life this commandment is the only commandment explicitly given to the disciples. And loving one another *within* the community is in the gospel of John the defining characteristic, the hallmark if you will, of discipleship. This is one of the points where, quite frankly, it becomes confusing to be a Christian. We have four gospels: Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John and they all tell the same story from different points of view and therefore the details do not always match up.

The Gospel of John implies that the commandment to love one another is the ultimate commandment but we are very used to hearing from the synoptic gospels Matthew, Mark and Luke, the emphasis on loving God and loving one's neighbor, or if we press a little further in Matthew, the challenge of loving one's enemy. There is a historical explanation for this. Matthew, Mark and Luke were written early in the aftermath of Jesus' life and those particular evangelists looked over one another's shoulders as they were writing their gospels.

John is at some distance in years from the first three gospels. By John's time the small community of Jews that was identifying itself as clustered around Jesus of Nazareth was coming from a different point of view. John's gospel is to distinguish this group from others. It is why we hear words today that we would interpret as anti-Semitic, not because they were intended to be anti-Semitic but to create a separation of this group of Jews from all others. The supremacy of the commandment to love one another provides cohesion. You would want that internal loyalty in a new and developing community. This may help locate John's purposes in writing this gospel and in understanding the

apparent contradictions between John's gospel and the other three. But understanding context does not invalidate the spiritual depth of the message we hear from John.

Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. Jesus points to himself and his love for his disciples as the model of the love that he is suggesting. Jesus loves the disciples and us by extension without limit, without condition, as we just heard in the hymn, *Loving Us Just as we Are* and even the laying down his life for them, for us. Jesus calls us to a love for one another that he himself bears for us and it is a love so unbounded, so limitless in its nature, that it esteems love over life. It esteems love over life and will give away life for that love. We come to a very important distinction and understanding here. Jesus *gave away* his life rather than *giving up* his life. Giving away life is an expression of a deep relationship with God, so deep that this act of giving away life is an act of grace. It is a reflection of the fullness of this relationship with God. Giving up life is a sacrifice. Giving up life means self denial. That is what Peter was offering with his authentic love to Jesus. He was offering to give up his life, to sacrifice himself. In Saint John's view of Jesus, the love Jesus had for his disciples was so thoroughly a gift from God that giving away his life was living into the fullest expression of his love of God and God's love of him.

Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. As you read the commentaries on the Gospel of John and I do, the Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr. and Archbishop Oscar Romero are the two examples that scholars most often sight is those who in our modern time live out this idea of giving away life for the sake of love. I think that every one of you knows who Martin Luther King is but I am beginning to feel dated because I think maybe some of you do not know who Archbishop Oscar Romero is. Archbishop Oscar Romero was the Roman Catholic Archbishop of El Salvador. He was assassinated in March of 1980 while he was saying mass because he supported the peasants in his country who were being slaughtered at the rate of 3,000 a day by the Salvadoran army. Moments before a sniper killed him the archbishop, reflecting on scripture, said "one must not love oneself so much as to avoid getting involved in the risks of life that history demands of us and those that fend off danger will lose their lives" and then he was shot.

Both of these men were very human and not so very different from us. I do not think either man chose to die though I do believe that both men knew they would die because the highest value to them was the absolute commitment they had in their love for the people who were in their care. Fortunately most of us are not asked to die for one another but the offering of our lives is in the DNA of what it means to be a Christian. Though we may not be asked to give up our lives, Jesus is clear in saying that the way others will know we are his disciples is by the love we have for one another. You know the song; *They will know we are Christians by our love, by our love.*

Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. This is the commandment to love within the community and among the faithful. The commandments certainly strengthens the church but out of context this commandment can be used to promote an inwardness, if you will an ecclesiastical xenophobia, that undermines Jesus'

commandments to love outside the church up to and including our enemies. But on the other side it is also possible to underrate this commandment to love one another as being too soft, too easy, not really worth getting involved with - and that would be a mistake. As we all well know it is sometimes harder to love those up close than those at some distance.

It is so easy to take one another for granted. We are attracted to the novelty of someone new that is fresh and exciting. We appreciate someone different from us because of his or her distinctiveness. Look around the room now. When was the last time you stood back and beheld the people that you see every Sunday and saw them in a larger context with all that their spirit and life story brings?

Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. I have pondered and read this passage until I have found, what is for me, a new voice in it. You also should love one another, not you had better and not you must, but instead, you really should love one another. I hear tenderness in this exhortation which opens a small window to the heart of Jesus where you can hear gentleness in the mix of a commandment and you catch a glimpse of the deep affection that Jesus has for all of us who surround him. We know that Jesus loves us. This is a moment to ponder his fondness for us as well. *Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another.* Amen.