



Be the First to Love



A Sermon By
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April 24, 2016

Grace Episcopal Church
Silver Spring, Maryland

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John 13:31-35

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The Fifth Sunday of Easter

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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.

John 13:34-35

When I was young, my family would have a big get-together once a year. Everyone would be there: parents, grandparents, aunts, uncles, cousins, from both sides of the family. People would arrive around mid-morning, always carrying some food, and there would be lots of hugs and kisses. After all the greetings, it never took long for people to find something to do and keep them busy. The kids spent the day playing games, outside in the yard or downstairs in the basement. Moms were in the kitchen, cooking and catching up. Fathers huddled around the grill or did some handy-man job, all while talking sports and politics. And, the grandparents just sat nearby, watching everything unfold, basking in the glow of family.

The whole day had the air of a “Kodak Moment,” something you would see in a television commercial, picture perfect happiness with smiling faces and love all around, except, that picture would never last, because at some point during the day, someone would say something or do something that upset someone else, and before you knew it, long-simmering feelings were boiling over. Resentment and bitterness, rivalries and insecurities erupted like a volcano, followed by awkward silences, with no one making eye contact, or people were arguing, calling names and pointing fingers. It happened every single time we got together, to the point where I dreaded these gatherings. Family... it’s complicated.

If this sounds at all familiar, or if you have ever been part of a group or community where everything seems fine on the surface, but underneath there is emotional drama and turmoil, then you can understand the context for today’s Gospel reading.

It was the evening of the Last Supper. Jesus and the disciples were together celebrating the festival of Passover, one of the most important holidays of the year, and ostensibly, their life together was going well. They had been brothers for about three years, and in that time, had changed the lives of countless people. Yes, there was animosity with the Jewish authorities, but in the big picture, that was nothing compared to all the men and women and children who experienced the power of God’s love through Jesus and his disciples. So, as they sat down for the Passover meal, there was much for which to rejoice and be thankful.

Unfortunately, Jesus was not in the mood for partying. He was deeply troubled in spirit because he knew how the evening would end, and toward the end of dinner, he had to tell the disciples: *“One of you will betray me.”*

The disciples just looked at one another, uncertain of whom he was speaking. Tension and suspicion filled the air. It was so thick you could cut it with a knife. “Who could it be?” they wondered. “How was this possible? Who would do such a thing?”

We all know the answer, of course. Caught red-handed, Judas had no choice but to leave, running out into the dark night, leaving the disciples stunned and speechless. Jesus tried to calm their nerves by explaining what was happening, telling the disciples this was all part of God’s plan:

“Now the Son of Man has been glorified, and God has been glorified in him... Little children, I am with you only a little longer... and as I said to the Jews so now I say to you, ‘Where I am going, you cannot come.’”

But then, in the midst of speaking, Jesus’ focus shifted, as if he had a different thought mid-sentence. We hear it in his language, with the pronouns changing from “I” to “you.” Rather than talking about God and what God was doing through him, Jesus started talking about the disciples, telling them what to do, how to act, giving them a new commandment.

Jesus was worried about the disciples. They were facing a significant change in their lives, an impending emotional trauma, and Jesus did not know how they would react. His death might bring out all of the group’s dysfunction, as their different personalities, opinions, and goals started to clash. This often occurs when a family member dies, and it could have happened to the disciples. There could have been arguments, conflicts, suppressed feelings bursting out, one disciple not speaking to another, or one refusing to see another. The health of the whole group was at risk. They might have broken up, gone their separate ways, never seen each other again. And, Jesus realized it.

Every family and community has some level of crazy behavior, drama and malfunction. Oftentimes, it comes from poor communication over expectations and needs. There are differences over money, or children, or sex. Parents feel their children don’t listen to them, and teenagers don’t talk to their parents. There is competition between siblings, relatives who won’t mind their own business, and long-held family secrets and addictions. Sometimes, it can be so bad we want to pull our hair out. We feel anxious, angry, frustrated, sad, completely stressed and exhausted to the point where we cannot even sleep, and we don’t know what to do.

The same complicated dynamics exist within our American family, and the entire human family. As the world gets flatter and smaller, people from all sorts of different backgrounds are living

closer together than ever before, but rather than talking with each other, learning how to relate to one another, we allow age-old fears and stereotypes and prejudice to prevail. As a result, there is tension, suspicion, animosity and division, between East and West, Christian and Muslim, black and white, Republican and Democrat.

Whenever we face difficult relationships, no matter who we are, our tendency is to point a finger at the other person and cast the blame in their direction. The problem is because of them, what they did, or what they said. We believe the whole situation is their fault, and so the solution is to get them to change their ways. “If only they would change,” we tell ourselves, “everything would be fine.” But, you cannot make another person change, and even trying can be incredibly frustrating.

On the other hand, we can change ourselves, the way we think, the way we act. We have to remember that relationships are a two way street. It takes two to tango, as the saying goes, and maybe the problem is just as much our fault as it is the other person’s. Maybe we are the crazy ones. Maybe we are the dysfunctional ones. Maybe we are causing all the drama. And therefore, maybe we are the answer for which we are looking.

I think that is what Jesus was trying to say to the disciples. Throughout his ministry, people would come up to Jesus and say, “Hey, look at what that person is doing,” hoping Jesus would condemn that person’s actions, but so often, Jesus’ response was to say, “Stop worrying about what other people are doing and worry about yourself.”

Let anyone among you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone.

Why do you see the speck in your neighbor’s eye, but do not notice the log in our own?

If we are trying to improve a family relationship, change a group dynamic, or transform our community and the world, the answer is in patterning ourselves after Jesus. He is the way and the truth and the life. We have to go the extra mile, give it all we have, open our arms wide and be the first to love, because that is the way of Jesus, the way that leads to new life.

“I give you a new commandment,” he said, “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.”

Amen.