



Memorial Day, May 26, 2013
Pastor Mark Toone
Chapel Hill Presbyterian Church

Cram Session: Jesus' Parting Words – Love!

John 13:31-35; 15:12-17

We are spending several weeks listening in on the cram session that occurred between Jesus and his disciples in the upper room the night before he was crucified. Today we touch on one of John's favorite themes: love. The other three gospels speak of love 28 times. Between his gospel and his letters, John mentions love 60 times! That's a lot of love! And for our text we return to chapter 13 where the Upper Room Discourse begins. How did Jesus begin that final evening together? He washed his disciples' filthy feet, a task usually reserved for the lowest of slaves. With that unprecedented act of humility to set the stage, Jesus begins his teaching. [Read 34-35. 15:12-17]

On this Memorial Day, I'd like to ask a question: Is there anyone here this morning whose life was saved by a fellow warrior who sacrificed his own life? In February 2008, Lance Corporal Matthew Croucher of the British Royal Marines was part of a company of commandos investigating a Taliban bomb-making facility in Afghanistan. Suddenly, a grenade was tossed into their midst. With a few seconds to think about it, he threw himself on top of the grenade and saved his comrades. You've heard stories like that before, right. This one is different. He survived. But he was ready to die for his friends.

And we don't have to Afghanistan to discover that kind of heroism. When the tornadoes struck Oklahoma last week, one teacher used her body to shield six students. At that same school, rescue workers pulled a car off another teacher... and found three little kids beneath her—alive!

When you hear such stories you wonder, "What about me? Would I be willing to lay down my life for others?" You hope so, of course. You hope you have the hero in you. But how can you be sure?

This is what Jesus was speaking of in the Upper Room. He was the man who was about to lay down his life for his friends... friends who hardly deserved that sacrifice, by the way... friends who were about to betray and deny and run and hide to save their own skins. But Jesus would be true to his word; he would lay down his life for his friends. Not just those twelve... but for the billions down through the centuries who would discover the gentle voice of the Holy Spirit whispering, "Will you be My friend?" Amazing! The God of the universe who could call us anything He wants: Subjects. Creations. Slaves. Disappointments. Instead,

he calls us "Friend!" How sweet is that? Jesus calls you Friend and lays down his life for you!

But what compels that sacrifice? What stirs the heart of Christ to do such a thing? Love. You know the verse: "For God so loved the world..." Say that with me... but put your name in the place of "world": For God so loved Mark... that he gave His only Son. "Greater love has no man than this: that a man lay down his life for his friends. You are my friends!" Just imagine!

The starting point in the Upper Room discourse is this amazing disclosure: God has called us "friend!" He loves us. And God the Son has laid down his life for us, his friends... out of love. But where does Jesus go from there? If that is true, so what? Well, we now listen as Jesus says something he says nowhere else... ever. Do you know what it is? Out of that heart of love, what does Jesus say here that you can find in none of his other teachings? "I command you..." Nowhere else does Jesus say, "I command you to do... ____." Nowhere but here: "A new command I give you: Love one another." In other places he told his disciples to obey his commands. But this is the only time he actually said it. "A New command I give you: Love one another."

But wait a second. What's new about it? Did the Old Testament never talk about love? Is this the first time God's people were ever told they ought to love one another? Hmmm... how about a little commandment from the Old Testament that went something like this: "Love your neighbor as yourself." Leviticus 19. When Jesus interpreted that scripture, he toughened its requirements by defining neighbor. Do you remember the parable he told when someone asked him, "Who is this neighbor I am supposed to love?" The Good Samaritan! A story of how a Samaritan—the arch enemy of the Jews—loved the Jewish man who had been beaten and robbed by caring for him when other Jews just stepped around his broken body. It would be the equivalent today of making a member of the Taliban a hero in a sermon.

So Jesus upped the ante on what "loving your neighbor" meant. But when those words were first commanded back in Leviticus, "neighbor" meant "your fellow Jew" —in other words, "one another." They were to love God withal their heart, soul, mind and strength. And they were to love one another—their Jewish neighbor—as they loved themselves.

That's not new; that was very old. So how can Jesus call this a new command? Because of the second part of the phrase: "...as I have loved you!" The sign of Christian discipleship is that they will love each other in the same way that Jesus loved them... with a love that is willing to sacrifice itself for the sake of others. This is "new" because no one had ever loved the way that Jesus was about to love the world.

But could we burrow in a little deeper? Because there is more to this than meets the eye. Do you see that little word “as”? “As I have loved you?” The Greek word, *kathos*, can be comparative. “Do this in the same way that I do it.” But it can also be—hold on to your pews here—causative. What I mean is this: that little word, “as”, ALSO means “a source of something from below or from within.” It is a word that would describe a deep well you can tap into and that bubbles over. So Jesus is saying, “Love one another with my deep pool of love that you can tap into. I want you to love one another the way you have seen me love. But even more, I will make it possible for you to love one another because you can tap into my endless source of love... even when yours dries up.” Christ’s love causes us to love!

So, this is not about ginning up emotions you do not possess to love people you find unloving or even awful. This is not dependent upon your ability, your discipline and your saintliness. This “other-love” depends upon the deep pool of Christ’s love which is yours for the tapping. It means we pass on the deep, undeserved love we receive from Jesus to others who are equally undeserving, equally desperate, and equally famished for love.

Here we tie back into last week’s sermon. When did that deep, inner pool of Christ’s love become available to them? Pentecost! When the Holy Spirit was sent to live inside every believer. When the Spirit of Jesus takes up residence within them—and within us—suddenly we have at our disposal the depth of Jesus’ love which allows us to love one another...even the one another’s that are so very hard for us to love. Jesus does this through us!

But how do we access this deep, inner pool? I think it starts by taking our eyes off ourselves and actually looking at other people... actually seeing them as people beloved of God. Here is one thing I practice from time to time. I don’t like crowds very much... unless of course they are seated before me adoringly, drinking in my every word—those crowds I love! But crowded airports, crowded malls... not my thing and I find them irritating. So just to keep my heart soft, from time to time as I brush through the masses I do this: I will look at individuals, one by one as they pass me, right in the face, and say to myself, “Christ died for you. Christ died for you. Christ died for you. Christ died for you.” These unsuspecting strangers have no idea the inner dialogue that is going on inside my head. It softens my heart; it makes me care more about the frustration they are experiencing at that moment; it helps me to love them.

How much easier and deeper, then ought to be the connection we feel when we walk around this building on Sunday? Slow down from our mad rush to the omelet table long enough to actually look into the face of those people and say, walk out! “Christ died for you. You are my brother. You are my sister. You are precious to God... and you belong to me and I belong to you!” I received an email from a woman last week who had been struggling to find a church home. Finally, she visited Chapel Hill. And in one of our services, she noticed a member reach down

and just touch the cheek of a disabled child with an act of loving tenderness. It was a completely unconscious act, I'm sure. But this woman saw that simple act of loving one another... and it broke her heart for this church. She knew she had found her home. "By this will all men know that you are my disciples; if you love one another."

This is the supreme witness to our Christian discipleship. Not good doctrine. Not charity. Not miracles of healing or deliverance. Not material blessing. Not numerical growth. Not a cross on a neck or a cross on bumper sticker or a cross on our wall in our home. No, the supreme witness... the supreme evidence that proves to outsiders we are Christ-followers, is the way they see us loving one another. One Christian named Marcus writing in the second century to a non-Christian tried to explain our strange bond this way: "They love each other almost before they even meet."

Alas, the one command of Jesus to his disciples is not always obeyed, is it? In fact, it is often not obeyed. How many of you have endured church experiences where members treated each other shamefully? Where battle lines were drawn, horrible things said and done? Where members of the same church family couldn't stand each other, wouldn't look at each other, wouldn't sit together? Horrible, wasn't it? In Matthew Jesus taught us to love our enemies. At first, you might think that the harder thing. But that isn't true, is it? Sometimes loving family—those you know the best—can be the hardest thing of all. Perhaps that is why Jesus gave us only one commandment to follow. It's a full-time job, and if we do that well, everything else falls into place: love one another!

This last week provided a terrifying contrast between Christian love and that of other kinds, didn't it? We learned of a young British soldier who was run down with a car and chopped up in the streets of London as an act of religious devotion. Unapologetically and proudly, hands dripping with blood, his murderer spoke into a camera phone and declared this to be an act of worship. According to him, this barbaric act is how we could know that they were devout followers of Allah.

At about the same time, our missionary Dave Eubanks was deep in Burma, caring for a tribe that has been brutalized by the Burmese military. While there we received a prayer request because Dave and his team faced imminent danger. They still do. I can't go into details other than to say there was an official request from the authorities being circulated in the area asking for Dave to be betrayed by his friends and handed over. We are still awaiting updates, but it is tense and dangerous. This is nothing new for Dave. He and his family have devoted their lives to serving the oppressed people of Burma. He has spoken repeatedly to me of his willingness to die for that cause. He hopes he won't for a while—so do we—but he considers it the price of doing the Lord's business.

Here is a stark contrast between the faith of Jesus and the faith of others. Two who feel called to kill for their god—and one who feels called to die for his God and his friends.

But how do we apply this to our lives? Most of us will never be called upon to die for our friends. But if we could leave with these words ringing in our ears and in our hearts, what difference would it make to our witness in the world: “Love one another... greater love has no one than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends.” If we could remember and recite and question our hearts on this daily: how am I loving my friends? Do I care about them? Do I look up to greet them on the way in and out of church? Do I look upon a person I might never socialize with, who sits in my pew, and say to myself, ‘That is my brother. That is my sister!’? Do I feel tenderly toward them and express it in some way? And if I don’t feel tenderly, do I act with Christ’s love toward the one He loves even so? Am I willing to lay down my life, my time, my money, my convenience for them... my Christ-friends?”

We have an 80 year old man and his wife in our church. They are infirm. They need to move and need help. Who will step up and say, “I offer my life in love for my weak friends?” We have a sister in this congregation who lost her husband last week. Who will step up and say, “I will offer my life in love to my grieving friend.” There is a woman in this congregation who has been abandoned by her husband and feels worthless and frightened. Who will discover her, step up and say, “I will offer my life in love to my lonely friend?”

We have people here this morning who do not know Jesus, who are visiting for the first time, who may have been suspicious of Christianity or of Chapel Hill but have somehow found their way here today. They are sitting back, watching, watching, watching the way we behave; the way we treat each other. They come from a dog-eat-dog world; from a business setting where it is every man, every woman for themselves; where success is a zero-sum game... you must fall down so that I might rise up.

And then, they walk through our doors, are greeted by seemingly sincere, blue-shirted welcomers, notice the hugging and smiles and listen to the teachings of a rabbi who says that the way up is down. The way to raise your life to new heights is to lay your life down in love and service. It is crazy. It is counter-intuitive, and it is what the world needs now. Love, sweet love—the real love, the deep pool of Jesus’ love—that is what this world needs now... and always has.

One of my favorite modern hymns speaks of this deep pool of Jesus’ love that we have been invited to tap into. As you listen to this song, perhaps you will sing along. Or perhaps you will just reflect upon how you need to draw more deeply from the deep, deep love of Jesus.

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2f1bcJopx54>

You know what I call you, right? Sweetheart church. That is what you are. You know how to love each other. It is one of the things you do well, already. My charge today, then, is not, "You'd better start doing this!" My charge—and I'm so grateful to be able to say this—my charge is simply, "Keep doing what you do so well. Keep loving one another. Keep laying down your life in service for one another. Keep being unintentional witnesses to your love of Jesus by the way you love your Christ-friends, and let our guests and let our world catch you doing it! "By this will all men know that you are my disciples...if you love one another!"

Sermon Questions

- **REFLECT & APPLY TOGETHER:** Share your thoughts. Don't teach! Listen and reflect on God's word together; grapple with what God is calling us to do and be through this passage.

- **PRAY TOGETHER:** Tell the Lord one thing you are thankful for, and lay one concern before the Lord.

- **DIG DEEPER**
 1. How is Jesus' command to love one another "new?" Don't we find love in the Old Testament?
 2. Share two things, please. First, a time when you felt deeply loved by the Church. And, a time that you felt unloved by the Church.
 3. Can you think of a time when you noticed Christians loving each other and were drawn to them? Talk about it.
 4. Jesus speaks here of loving each other, i.e., fellow believers. Yet he speaks in other places about loving our enemies. Doesn't John care about "our enemies?"
 5. How well do you love your fellow Christians?