

A Spiritual Spring for the Week

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Sermon Text: John 13:1-17, 31-35

Sermon Title: "A New Kind of Love" (Trekking through the Gospel of John)

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The word *love* means many things to us. We use the word *love* to describe our affection for people, places, and things. We use the word so often that its meaning may have lost its significance, its power. The word itself might be as common as the words *the* and *is*.

We say to the person we are married to or the person we are dating, "I love you," because we hold a great affection for the other person. But then we walk by the pet store and say to the puppy in the window, "Oh, I love him." That furry little puppy is really cute behind the glass, wagging its little tail so much that its little bum shakes out of control. Then we stop by the pizzeria, and we say, "I would love to have a pepperoni and anchovy pizza" (well, some of us would). Our mouths are watering as we imagine that flat triangle of tomato and cheese deliciousness. Now think about it: do we love a piece of pizza as much as we love a person? Do we have the same deep affection for an animal as we would for a spouse or a child or

grandchild? Probably not. The word *love* is thrown around as a common word.

McDonald's motto for the last 7 years or so has been, "I'm lovin' it." I'm lovin' what? A double Quarter Pounder with cheese and fries clogging our arteries with saturated and trans fats? A strawberry or chocolate milkshake expanding our waistlines? Is it Ronald McDonald that we love? Who has seen him in person lately? We have seen Mickey Mouse in DisneyWorld more times than we've seen Ronald McDonald, so it might not be him we are lovin'.

We don't know what we are suppose to love at McDonalds, but we certainly don't love a fast-food joint as much as we love people such as our church family, our spouses, our children and grandchildren, our parents. We certain love God more than all other things in life, don't we? Instead of "I'm lovin' it," we should be saying "I'm lovin' God."

But what do we mean by using the word *love*? Love can mean so many things, so that we might not have a clue what it really means.

In John 13, Jesus is having his last meal with his disciples. It happens to be the Passover meal they celebrate, a long religious tradition of remembering the agony of those Jews who once toiled in Egypt, but were

able to escape under the leadership of Moses. The disciples and Jesus were quite familiar with the Passover celebration with all its food and meanings. But it was still Jesus' last supper with those men, and so he had some last instructions to share with them.

Jesus gives the men a new commandment: Love one another. "As I have loved you, so you love one another."¹ Sounds simple enough, doesn't it? The disciples should know this commandment, because it is one of the greatest commandments that summarizes the entire Old Testament law (the other is, "The Lord is one, and you should love the Lord with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength."). Jesus had taught his disciples earlier that, along with loving God, they should love their neighbors as themselves.² So this new commandment shouldn't sound too new, and it should be easy to follow, right?

But if Jesus' commandment to love one another is so easy to follow, why did Jesus spend the time with his disciples to mention it? If Jesus' commandment is something we should know anyhow, why did he make it a new commandment?

Jesus' new commandment isn't just "Love one another." Look at what Jesus says to the disciples:

¹ John 13:34.

² Cf. Luke 10:27.

“Even as *I have loved you*, that you also love one another.” Jesus’ commandment is so new, because we are to reflect the sort of love that Jesus reflected. In essence, his love is to be our love. His concern, his compassion, his sympathy and empathy is completely ours.

One way – and we mean, just one way out of the thousands of ways – that Jesus demonstrated love was by washing the disciples’ feet. At the beginning of John 13, we read something that we will not read in the other Gospels. After the Passover meal is ended, and Jesus’ last supper with his disciples has ended, Jesus takes off his outer garment, which means he is still wearing a few articles of clothing, but not as many as a person would wear. He takes a towel and girds himself up, which means he wears the towel as an apron. And Jesus, the Son of Man, the Savior of the world, begins to wash feet.

Now, washing feet was a necessary thing during Jesus’ time. People didn’t wear Nikes or Uggs to cover their entire feet; they walked around in sandals that exposed most of their feet. They didn’t walk on paved roads and sidewalks but on the dusty, dirty ground. So after a few minutes outside, a person’s feet would be covered with all sorts of, let us say, substances. Some of those substances were dirt-based and some of

them animal-based. Last weekend I was walking through my backyard, and I found the place that our dog had used as a bathroom. She may be a small dog, but excrement is still excrement. I was wearing sandals, and I had a time trying to get the stuff off with a garden hose. The disciples' feet, like any other person's foot, could be covered with who-knows-what.

And so, it was a courtesy of any homeowner to provide a clay bowl of water near the doorway for anybody entering their house. The owner and his family and his guests could wash up before coming inside. If homeowners were wealthy enough, they got the servants to wash feet. It doesn't matter who you are – even if you are a servant – washing somebody else's feet was a degrading job. You get down on your knee to a level below the person you are serving, and you take their dirty, dusty feet, and you get all their dirt and substances off. It was humiliating, but it has to be done.

It is a good chance that the disciples and Jesus had already washed their feet before eating their Passover meal. Notice that John gives us the time of the scene – he likes to do that – and the time is during the supper is eaten. If you wash your feet from being outside, you wash them before entering the dining

room, let alone before eating the Passover meal. But John says that it is during supper. Jesus takes off his outer garment, and assumes the lowly position of a servant to his students, and washes their feet (again?) out of a sign of his love. “A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another; as I have loved you, you also love one another.”

How is Jesus’ commandment new? Jesus’ kind of love – the same love he wants us to reflect – is vulnerable. It is open and defenseless. It doesn’t hold back anything. It doesn’t care what it appears to be to others. Jesus’ love just is, and it goes to the very core of a person, and gives them life.

This new commandment of Jesus asks us to leave ourselves vulnerable to others. It asks us to remove the clothing of our reputations, our pride, our stubbornness, and to be present and available to the other person. This love doesn’t care what others might say about us. It doesn’t care how silly we might look. It doesn’t care what we might think having to do something that could be deemed “below us.” Jesus’ love, the love he wants us to have for others, walks past the obstacles and insults, and meets another person at the very place where they are broken and hurting.

This love isn’t sentimental with warm fuzzies – it is

a conscious self-sacrifice we offer to another person, putting aside our needs to raise up another's needs. The unfettered love we give makes things happen for the other person. Their needs are met, and the burden of feeling like they have to do it all on their own is lifted. They realize they are not alone in this world. They can move on knowing that somebody else cares about them; and then when the next problem arises (as they always do), we can remove the garments of our selfishness and help them once more.

I witnessed Jesus' love in a parent who was devastated by the fact that her child had autism.³ Severe autism. He didn't show it at first: as a baby he responded to his parent's voices and watched everything they were doing. But around the age of one, he began to ignore his parents' voices and commands. He was in his own world, and the doctors diagnosed him with autism. The mother would not take the situation lightly. She wanted to find a cure for her child, although none exists at this time. She spoke with a psychologist that knew nothing about autism, but was interested enough to investigate it. Their discoveries turned into visiting thousands of families with autistic children, which turned into

³ From the PBS program NovaScienceNOW, the particular episode is called "Autism Genes."

collecting a bank of thousands of DNA samples from these children and their parents, which has turned into a discovery of a gene in the DNA of autistic children that might be linked to autism. This one mother put aside her idea of the perfect family, and did what she could to find a cure for her child and countless more. The most touching piece of this story, though, was when the boy himself turned 13, and he was able to participate in his own Bar Mitzvah as a maturing Jewish boy. He held the large scroll of the Torah, which he could not read himself, and analyzed the text as though he was searching for a precious jewel. Searching through God's word in the hope of finding a precious jewel – what a concept!

Jesus' love can be found on a school bus with two students sitting next to each other. The boy sitting on the aisle notices that the girl he has become mild friends with is not talking. The boy doesn't care what it might look like, if he started talking to the girl, but he asks her what is wrong. Surprisingly she tells him about problem with classes and teachers and friends, and the boy listens. He doesn't have a PhD in psychology, but he is willing to remove his garment of pride and share the love Jesus would share with others.

We saw a glimmer of Jesus' love, when the vote

was being taken to raise our nation's Debt Ceiling, and Gabby Giffords came to the Capitol to offer her vote. They weren't Republicans and Democrats on that floor – there wasn't any political rhetoric or vitriol (venom) shared during her appearance. Everyone applauded and shared their warmest feelings with her. If only Congress could show a little more of Jesus' love when they speak to us on TV. Well, we can hope.

“A new commandment I give you: Love one another just as I have loved you.” In thousands of ways, Jesus went out of the way to love others. He entered what appeared to be intolerable situations and made them tolerable with his compassion and care.

Jesus is a great example to follow, and his love is the greatest to ever carry around. Love with such depth that it has the Savior written all over it. Love with such significance that we never know its impact until we share it. What does the word love mean, when we use it? Next time we use it, we just might mean much more than we expect.

Assurance of Pardon:

Hear the Good News: what we deserve to have, Jesus has carried for us: sin and destruction and death. Jesus is the source of eternal life, and we can have such life if we accept him and believe. Believe this good news, brothers and sisters: In Jesus Christ you and I are forgiven! Thanks be to God! Amen.