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May 15, 2022

Acts 11:1-18

John 13:31-35

BY THIS EVERYONE WILL KNOW

I thought I knew what the word ‘new’ means. ‘New’ has to do with that which recently came into being. ‘New’ is some rule or policy or invention that replaces a practice used in the past. ‘New’ has to do with some product being changed, with the word ‘new’ frequently being followed by the phrase ‘and improved.’ ‘New’ is any music the next generation likes that leaves me wondering what happened to good old rock and roll. There is so much that is new all around us that all the ‘newness’ can get a bit old sometimes. When Jesus says he is giving his disciples a ‘new’ commandment, I’m expecting him to talk about something we haven’t heard about before. But this ‘new’ commandment is a directive for his followers to love one another. Can you tell me, Jesus - anything new about that?

A commandment in the book of Leviticus about loving one’s neighbor was and is central to Jewish beliefs. Jesus had been around these disciples for three years. I’m not inclined to believe that love would have been such a novel topic. And yet, in John’s Gospel, the commandment to love one another is the one main thing Jesus tells his followers to do. “Love one another as I have loved you.”

Perhaps, here is what is new – Jesus being the model for how to love each other. Jesus had incorporated, had incarnated that ancient ideal to become the pattern of how the disciples were to love one another. Let’s note that he is saying this and showing them how to do it on the night before his death. He had just washed the disciples’ feet, humbly serving them. Right before he said this, Jesus knowingly watched Judas Iscariot leave in order to betray him. Immediately after this passage, he will rightly predict that Simon Peter will deny him three times. In the next several hours, most of the others will abandon him. Just when they were showing how frail were their abilities to live up to who they were to be as his followers, Jesus challenges them saying, “Love one another, even as I have loved you.” He showed his love for them through serving them, feeding them, guiding them,

praying for them, enabling them to experience the wholeness and holiness of God through forgiving, affirming, and equipping them. This is the kind of love, not primarily just a feeling, not Hallmark card emotion, but love lived out so that the disciples of Jesus Christ would come to be known for it. It was to be their main identifying mark.

We hear in the account from the Book of Acts about Peter, whose faith identity had depended on refusing to eat non-kosher food, as well as refusing to associate with non-kosher people known as Gentiles. But Peter, who seems to learn only when something happens three times, has a vision that comes to him three times. The triple vision helped him to grow in his understanding of this new way, guided by Jesus and the Holy Spirit. His faith needed to take its identity by a willingness to build bridges instead of walls, to share the good news of God's love for all people, which meant a call for people of God to be loving at the very core of their being.

Part of what's new is that kind of love to which Jesus calls us takes on different forms depending on the context. Fred and Eunice had loved each other almost from first sight. When they got married, like many couples, they didn't anticipate what might happen far into the future, but they had taken vows to love each other in plenty and in want, in joy and in sorrow, in sickness and in health, as long as they both were living. How they lived out that love took different forms based on what they were facing together. There was an early miscarriage which was a challenge. A need for Fred to travel with his work for a period of time required adjustments in their relationship. Some problems with the children and later the grandchildren cropped up. Each time, they figured out what it meant to live out their love for one another. In retirement, it began to become evident that Fred was having some short-term memory loss. Over time, his dementia got much worse. Eunice provided the structure and oversight Fred needed, but finally, with concerns about her own longevity, she made the painful decision to put him in a long-term care facility. From day one, Eunice visited Fred every day, spent the afternoon with him and often stayed for dinner. As Fred's condition progressed, he sometimes simply ignored Eunice, sometimes asked who she was or chatted as if she were a stranger. He was occasionally unkind, saying harsh things. Once, in his confusion, he warned Eunice that she better leave before his wife came back. Still Eunice visited

every day. Her closest friend at the church once asked her why she subjected herself to this every day since Fred had even forgotten that he was her husband. Eunice responded, “Yes, my dear Fred has forgotten a lot, even who he is, but I have not forgotten who I am – I am his loving wife.” There are significant differences between the covenantal love lived out between spouses and the love between sisters and brothers in Christ, but there need to be quite a few similarities as well.

In one of his very last books, C. S. Lewis examines the four Greek words for the concept of love found in the New Testament and then concludes that at bottom they come down to one decisive distinction: the difference between what he calls “need love” and “gift love.” Need love, Lewis says, is always born of emptiness. A need lover sees in every beloved object or person a value that he or she covets to possess. Need love moves out greedily to grasp and to appropriate for itself. In a popular image, need love sucks essence out of another and into itself. It does not take exceptional imagination, Lewis contends, to acknowledge that many times when we humans say to another, “I love you,” what we are really meaning is, “I need you, I want you. You have a value that I very much desire to make my own, no matter what the consequence may be to you.”

Now over against this graphic image, Lewis contends there is a very different reality. It is what he calls gift love. Instead of being born of emptiness or lack, this form of loving is born of fullness. The goal of gift love is to enrich and enhance the beloved rather than to extract value. It moves out beyond comfort zones to bless and to increase rather than to acquire or to diminish. Gift love is more like a bountiful, artesian well that continues to overflow than like a vacuum or a black hole. Lewis concludes this contrast by saying that the uniqueness of the biblical vision of reality is that God’s love is gift love, not need love. As long as gift love is in the world, the world is still encountering Jesus. And the great good news for each and every one of us is not only that we are loved by God in this marvelous way, but also that this is our deepest identity as well and is a way we can choose to live our lives.¹

We need something new. When we live out this kind of gift love, transformation occurs, at least within us and often beyond us. Jesus loved his disciples in this way.

Even today, he offers healing to broken hearts or hearts that are numb, so we as his followers would be gifted with a love that doesn't give up on one another, even when we might disagree about all kinds of things. It is a covenantal love to be lived out in times of plenty and in times of inflationary instability, in times of joyous celebration and in times of deep loss and fear, in pandemic times and in times of communal health and wellbeing. It is love that stands against naked aggression and armor-plated suit aggression. It is love that has the power of God's love as its source and shows love for all of God's people that is stronger than hatred or fear or power-lust or greed. As we live out this new commandment to the extent that it becomes what we are known for, we will get to know the One who challenges us and enables us to live in this way, and we will become new ourselves. Thanks be to God. Amen.

¹ C. S. Lewis, The Four Loves, Mariner Books, 1971.

