

THE SIGN OF DISCIPLESHIP

Psalm 148
John 13: 31-35

Faith Community
May 13, 2001

Introduction

We talk differently depending on whether we are in private or public. George Bush talks one way when he is in a cabinet meeting and says different things when he is holding a press conference. He can't share with the whole world what he can talk about with his closest advisors. In the cabinet meeting he talks more openly, and more confidentially than he can when the whole world is listening.

The same is true with families. We talk more intimately when we are at home than when we are in public. If we're going on a vacation, for example, we may say to our colleagues that we are going out to see the Grand Canyon, and we're going to visit relatives, whom we haven't seen for a long time, on the way.

At home with our family we might talk about how we will want to stay two days at Uncle Bill's because he is so much fun, and he usually likes to organize something interesting for all of us to see. And we will look forward to our stay with Aunt Millie because she is such a great cook. When we get to Uncle Fred's we will have to watch our time, because if he gets started on some of his stories we'll never make it to the Grand Canyon! It's a different kind of conversation at home than our in public. And it should be.

In Bible study we pay attention to whom Jesus is talking to when he speaks. Are the words of Jesus directed to the crowds of people who have followed to hear him speak? Or are the words directed to his disciples - those close followers who have committed themselves to him and his ministry?

In the passage we read this morning he speaks directly, and intimately, to his disciples. These are not words to everyone within earshot; they are private words to his closest friends. As he prepares to face his last days Jesus talks intimately with his disciples.

I

Jesus says, "I give you a new commandment, that you love one another." Maybe our first question is "What's new about this commandment?" Loving each other is an important part of the Old Testament. The prophets certainly called for love between people, and it is found all through the Old Testament. What's new? Maybe what Jesus is saying is "I want you to add a new commandment to the Ten Commandments." You know and understand the "big 10." I want you to add another one. Loving each other is so important that it rates up there with the Ten Commandments. Those commandments include a lot of "You shall nots" here is a "You shall" to include.

And it is a commandment. It is an order. God didn't give us the "10 suggestions," or the "10 Guidelines," or "10 Hints for better living." God gave us the Ten Commandments, as in "That is an order, soldier!"

II

The commandment is - "As I have loved you, you also must love one another". As you have been greatly loved, give that same love to each other. Care for each other, respect each other, support and encourage one another, be there for each other, give yourselves to each other.

It is so much easier to love when you have been loved. Many people believe it is difficult, maybe even impossible, to love others if you haven't been loved yourself. In another church where I worked, a young person was arrested for robbery. He was taken to the county juvenile center and held there. I called the chaplain at the center to let him know of the situation.

As we talked he said that he had a theory about juvenile delinquency. "Can I ask you a question?" he said.

"Of course, what is it?"

"Are there problems in this young man's family - problems between the parents or problems between the parents and children?"

"Yes," I said, "there are."

"So far, in every situation I have asked about people have given me the same answer. Kids aren't just bad and go around doing awful things. In the situations I've seen, everyone has come out of a difficult household situation."

Those who have not sensed love, find it more difficult to be loving themselves. We, as God's children, have received the greatest love - the love of God and of his son therefore we are able to love others deeply.

When we were in college, Sheila and I had the opportunity to meet a man named Bill Sands. He had spent several years in prison, and was now out. He had written a couple of books, and was speaking at colleges around the country.

As a child when Bill got in trouble, his mother whipped him with the stalks of a rose bush, thorns included. As he grew up, he got into more and more trouble, until he ended up in prison.

It was there, of all places, that he met a man and woman who cared about him, and helped him change his life. It was the warden and, his wife, of all people, who made the difference for him.

These two exceptional people showed their concern for him, demonstrated that they had not given up on him, and completely reversed the direction of his life. The warden's wife came into the prison and played cards with the inmates every week, right in the center of the prison courtyard. I asked Bill if she wasn't afraid for her safety. He said, "Not at all. If anyone tried to harm her, the inmates would have taken care of him before the guards ever got a chance to."

With the help of these caring people, Bill Sands got out of prison, and began a very productive life. One of the things he did was form a foundation for prison reform, so that other places could provide what he had experienced. One of the people on the foundation's board of directors was his former warden. He, of course, was the chairman of the board. He said it was a nice feeling to be his warden's boss for a change!

Caring can make such a difference. When we receive love, we can offer love. We, who are so profoundly loved by God, are capable of extraordinary acts of love. And that's what Christ requires of us - to love one another.

III

This is the sign of our discipleship. "By this everyone will know you are my disciples, because you love one another." When we love each other, it shows that we take our faith seriously. We are living what we say we believe. Hopefully people will be able to say about us what they said about the early Christians, "See how they love each other!"

Often when I visit people in the hospital, or when they have just recently come home from the hospital, the one recuperating will say "I got this card from someone in the church, and I can't put a face with the name. Can you help me with who this is?"

Every time the person is excited to think that someone cares about them, and is praying for them, even though they are not close friends. It is a marvelous sign that we are a loving and caring congregation.

Also people in the community are looking at us to see whether we care for each other. When someone in the community asks, "What kind of church is that?" one of the characteristics they are looking for is a congregation where people genuinely care about each other. It is a sign of Christian authenticity.

Conclusion

A man stands up on Sunday morning and says, "I'd like us all to be praying for Bill, from our congregation, he is going to be undergoing surgery at 10 o'clock on Wednesday. Let's pray at that time for Bill, and the doctors, and Bill's healing."

A young woman takes a meal to a widow who is in a wheelchair. She uncovers the meal, then sits down and has dinner with the woman who very rarely has guests for dinner. They enjoy warm conversation. After dinner they get out Scrabble and play a game.

Fourteen people, ranging in age from 13 to 72, meet at their church and then travel to the inner city to fix up a run-down home. They spend the day cleaning, painting, fixing windows, and caulking. They are there almost all day, and when they are done you can see a tremendous difference.

At the visiting hours the day before an elderly man's funeral, a dozen people come from his congregation to offer their support to his family, and to share their grief.

A woman who has been struggling with a long and heavy depression welcomes a friend from church who comes to have coffee and talk. This friend has been visiting her almost every week for a year. During this time they share some very personal concerns. Their conversations reflect a strong friendship and an intimate caring about each other. They can talk with each other very frankly because they have the security of a profound friendship. These conversations have been as much help to the woman who is struggling as years of therapy have been.

When things like this happen then the words are true - "See how they love one another." That is the sign that we are disciples of Jesus Christ.

Amen.