

drama going on. The disciples are distracted. Jesus has to refocus the disciples. From where they wondered off after he washed their feet. I imagine he got their attention by calling them back into the upper room of Peter's house. Now is the time to give them his last words and testament. His farewell sermon. He tells them he gives them a new commandment, to love one another. But wait a minute. The law to love is already in the Jewish Torah. What is new is Jesus tells them that love for one another must happen before their love can be shared with anyone else.

But this is confusing. It is not clear why we need to practice love among those we already know. They already know we love them. Also to know someone well is to know where we disagree with them. It is hard to swallow our pride, and go wash the feet of someone with whom we disagree.

Scene 2 Love starts in the community

One of the ways to read the Bible is to try to figure out based on the advice Jesus gives to the disciples, what was going on in their minds at the time. This is not “over-thinking,” this is trying to make the text more contextually relevant to the situation Jesus addresses, and therefore more relevant to us. So lets look at today's word using this way to read the Bible. I imagine the disciples were squabbling with each other. That they were stunned by Judas' decision to leave their company. That they were still negotiating who would sit next to Jesus at the supper table, and who would sit next to Jesus when his kingdom comes. They were so busy squabbling that they were ignoring each other's needs. That they were not reflecting God's love toward each other.

So Jesus gives the first disciples a new commandment, that they love one another. He says that the object of the disciple's love starts not with the world as a whole, nor even their enemies or their neighbor as in the Sermon on the Mount, but with the inner circle of the first disciples. The idea is that they cannot love their enemies, or their neighbor, or the world, if they cannot even love each other. This love commandment applies to the community of Jesus' disciples. Participation in love of one another is evidenced, as is Jesus', by acts of love that join the believer to God. Jesus says if his disciples do not love one another, they will not truly love others.

But wait a minute. This is difficult. Isn't it harder to love the people we know real well than it is to love the people whose faults we don't know very well? Also, isn't it harder to show acts of love to people whom we assume already know we love them? After all, we can't do everything we want to do. We have to prioritize.

I thank God every day that I have the health and the physical energy to both practice medicine and pastor a church. I also thank God every day for the spiritual energy that both God and Debbie have given me to do this. But I have had my share of medical illness, and have had several surgeries in the past. I had a medical condition known as ulcerative colitis diagnosed as a teenager. This is an intestinal disease that causes cramping and diarrhea. The teenage years are a bad time to have such a diagnosis. A time

when all you want to do is fit in and not be different. And it is hard to shake your original feelings as you move into adulthood. The only cure for this illness is total removal of your colon, which I had in 1991. This was a procedure that required 3 surgeries. With the first procedure, I kept it quiet, because I was embarrassed to be sick. I don't know exactly why, I think it is a cultural thing. Certainly not a scriptural thing. Somehow subconsciously I thought that if I am sick I am a sissy, or different, or have not just a physical flaw but also a character flaw. Or perhaps I did not want other people to know that God either does not love me, or is trying to teach me something. Alcoholics anonymous and other such groups are the best support and help we have for the addictions which plague us. I have never been to an AA meeting, but I have heard the negative thinking I just described is what they call "stinking thinking." It is not helpful, and does not allow for the gracious, loving, merciful, and forgiving God we read and hear about in the Good News. The Good News that God shares with us in Jesus, the Word which became flesh.

Illness and other tragedies, I have learned both first hand and in divinity school, are NOT God's punishment or God's attempt to instruct. They just happen. God's presence is felt not in God ripping through the fabric of space and time. God's presence is felt not just in private prayer, reading scripture, worship, but also in the comfort of the Christian community folding around us. Teresa of Avila was a nun in the 13th century, and a prolific writer. She writes that Jesus' body has died and gone to heaven. She writes that we are now his eyes, hands, and feet. Because Jesus' body has died and gone to heaven, and he no longer has a body here on earth. No body, except for us. We are now Jesus' body. You and me. And the church body. What an honor and privilege to be Jesus' body! To continue the ministry and mission he began during his bodily lifespan 2000 years ago!

The second and third times I had surgery in 1991 as part of the removal of my colon, I told everyone in my church. What an outpouring of love I felt! People sent me cards. People called me on the phone. People came to visit me in the hospital and at home. People brought me food. I felt I was important. I felt lifted up. I did not have time for "stinking thinking."

Being the hands and feet of Jesus toward someone we know well enough to have disagreed with in the past, is difficult. It requires two things. It requires showing them the love, mercy, and forgiveness God shows us and wants us to show each other. And it requires reprioritization. Sure there is a television show you want to watch. Sure you had planned to go on a picnic or to the lake with your family or friends. Sure you have an 8-5 job, or maybe even work 80 hours a week. But what about Sunday afternoons? If we have an 8-5 job, or we work 80 hours a week, can we spend Sunday afternoons visiting the sick or the bereaved? The sick and bereaved are usually not at Ruby Tuesdays on Sunday afternoon. They are usually either in the hospital or at home. And usually there are no medical tests on Sunday afternoons, because both the outpatient and the inpatient department of hospitals are at half staff on Sundays.

Katy Shelhart is in the hospital today, on the 6th floor of Williamson Medical Center. I think the members of our church can call her, or go by and visit her this afternoon. I think

you can call Bob and tell him you want to bring him some of today’s potluck leftovers for his freezer. I think you can call him when Katy comes home and bring over a home cooked meal because neither Katy nor Bob will feel like cooking for several weeks after she comes home. I think you can write her a note of encouragement. I think you can go visit them after she goes home. What an honor and privilege to be the body of Jesus!

We understand now that individually, we embody Jesus’ ministry to love and care for other people. But some would say that surely this is not something that would benefit the church. That surely this is a spiritual thing, not a religious thing. Surely it is something that benefits individuals and not the church.

Scene 3

Compassion and fellowship attract company

When you called me to pastor Brentwood First, you only had 8 to 10 people attending worship. I asked you if you wanted me to proclaim the Word on Sunday mornings, and to provide pastoral care, or if in addition you wanted me to evangelize in the community thereby grow the church. You told me you wanted me to do all three things. I told you this would require some changes, and you told me to get to it.

So before Easter, we published a website. We placed radio ads and TV ads. We sent mail-outs weekly to over 3000 households, 1/10th of Brentwood, over a span of 10 weeks. We changed our worship time and our lawn sign. We fertilized and spread weed killer to make the front lawn more attractive. We are in the process of doing some landscaping. We have monthly potluck brunches and weekly coffee fellowship. And we plan a Wednesday night Bible study this summer.

But studies have shown that none of this works as well as personal invitation. So I have encouraged and will continue to encourage you to bring your unchurched friends and neighbors to worship and to our potluck brunches.

And there is one more element in the evangelization plan, which Jesus tells us in today’s lesson. That is, that compassion attracts company.

Jesus tells the first disciples, “This is how everyone will recognize that you are my disciples – when they see the love you have for each other.” Jesus tells them that keeping this commandment is the identifying mark of discipleship, because it is the sign of the first disciples being in Jesus. Said in another way, the identifying mark of the community Jesus leaves behind is the mutual love of its members.

So we put up disabled parking space signs. We are wheel chair assessable with an entrance ramp from the parking lot. Check out the color of the carpet on the entrance ramp. We literally roll out the red carpet for those with disabilities. Our compassion attracts company.

And we pray during worship for people who are sick. Not just church members, but also friends of church members. When you tell me about unchurched people who would like a pastor visit, I visit them. But so can you. And you can certainly visit the members of our church who are sick or bereaved, and they will tell their friends and neighbors that we have a good thing going. That for us church is more than something that happens for just one hour on Sunday mornings. That for Brentwood First Presbyterian, church is an opportunity to join with Jesus any time, day or night, whenever we hear Jesus call our name. The word will get out that this is a church which cares. And our compassion will attract company.

Conclusion

Bon voyage sermons, the hands and feet of Jesus, and rolling out the red carpet. Jesus gives us a word or two which spiritually empowers us. Empowers us to love our enemies, our neighbor, and the world. He tells us to first love one another. And that our compassion will attract company. What an honor and privilege to embody Jesus, and to grow his church!

Glory be to God, Hallelujah, and the people say: (Amen)