



“The Condensed Gospel”
Scripture – John 13:21-35
Sermon preached by Gregory Knox Jones
Sunday, May 19, 2019

A colleague shares an exchange she had with her husband prior to his death. Having been diagnosed with a rare degenerative neurological condition, he knew his time was limited. In an introspective moment when they were conversing frankly about his illness, she asked, “What do you want our son to know about life after you are gone?”

How would you answer that question if you had a young child you would not be able to parent much longer? What wisdom would you bequeath?

The question hung in the air for a few moments before he responded. Then he said his wish for his son was that he would know that God and family are more important than a job or success. And since the time was ripe, his wife asked him what he wanted for her. He did not pause. He told her she needed to practice the piano. Although it likely evoked a chuckle, he was serious, because developing her skills on the piano would help her fulfill her calling as a worship leader and songwriter.¹ Not to mention the fact that playing would help her express her grief and help heal her soul.

Today’s Scripture reading comes from the Last Supper when Jesus knows he is a marked man. Jesus predicts that Judas will betray him, but first, we backtrack to what happened at the beginning of the meal. After Jesus and the twelve had gathered, Jesus got up from the table, poured water into a basin and began washing the feet of his disciples. This was the customary duty servants performed when guests came in off the dusty roads into someone’s home.

Jesus was their teacher and master; the man they had followed from village to village captivated by his wisdom and mesmerized by his healings. They had witnessed his brilliant jousting with the scribes and Pharisees who routinely attempted to undermine him. The disciples had become convinced that Jesus was the long-awaited Messiah. They called him “Lord” and “Teacher,” but here he was stooping down before them scrubbing their filthy feet like a lowly servant. It was a riveting experience they would never forget. And, of course, that was Jesus’ intention.

When he finished washing and wiping their feet, Jesus quizzed them to see if they caught his point. “Do you understand what I have done?” I suspect each man dropped his gaze to the floor in order not to catch the eye of Jesus. Each was afraid Jesus would call on him for the correct answer. To avoid any misunderstanding, Jesus unpacked the moment for them. He said, “I have given you an example. You ought to wash one another’s feet.” In other words, authentic leaders serve the needs of others.

While they are mulling that over, Jesus switched the subject and began talking about betrayal. He glanced around the room, this time catching the eyes of each and said, “One of you will betray me.” The disciples are stunned. Surely he is mistaken. “We are your friends and followers!” But while they were discussing among themselves the meaning of his words, Judas slipped out.

Jesus knows that the sand in his hour glass is running thin, so he says, “I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another.”

They now have an image of what that looks like to carry in their minds. It is the image of their teacher and master moving around the floor on his hands and knees with a basin of water and a towel rinsing and massaging their aching feet.

Consider how critical it is for followers of Jesus to love one another. Jesus senses that the vultures are circling and will soon scoop him up and drop him before Pilate. Jesus realizes the clock is about to strike midnight and he does not have time to cover everything he wants his followers to remember, so he must leave them with the core of his teachings. And at this critical moment, he does not say, “Here are the five things you need to *believe* about God and me.” Jesus declines to spell out the proper method of praying or insist that reading a scripture a day keeps the devil away. When the gravity of termination presses down like a boulder on his back and chaos is poised to pounce, instilling confusion and fear in his followers, Jesus is forced to reduce all of his teachings, including more than 40 parables, into one memorable line. He says, “I give you a new commandment” – not a suggestion, not a proposal, not an opinion, not an option, but a command – “Love one another as I have loved you.”

We are to love as Jesus loves. What does that entail? Immediately, we see that love is a great deal more than sentimental feelings. Sorry Hollywood, but love is more than an emotion. If we study the life of Jesus, it is obvious that love is expressed through action. It is something you do. You may recall the words of Garrison Keillor about “the stoic Swedish farmer in Minnesota who loved his wife so much he almost told her.”²

Of course, we should tell people we love them. Children and spouses and parents and friends should hear that they are loved – and as often as possible. All of us should hear those words every day. However, those words ring hollow if there is no loving action on which to base them. If there are no acts of kindness, if there are no expressions of empathy, if there is no willingness to forgive or to show up when times are tough, then the words, “I love you” are counterfeit. The words just vanish into the ether.

Loving as Jesus loved also focuses on what is in the best interest of the other. It is not necessarily doing what another wants you to do for him/her.

Every parent knows this. “You may not have ice cream for your dinner. You must go to school and brush your teeth and take a bath and go to church.” These may not be what the child wants, but it is what the child needs. When they become teenagers, we lecture them about high-risk behavior because we love them. Letting them do as they please does not express love, but rather indifference. It does not say, “I love you.” It says, “You are not worth the hassle.”

Love is not simply doing what the other person wants; it is doing what he/she needs. If you have an alcoholic in your family you know this in spades. You intervene and deliver an ultimatum because you love her.

Love is a great deal more than a warm feeling we have for another. Sometimes love requires toughness and determination and setting limits. Tough love is not easy or pleasant. If your father has been diagnosed with dementia, he may want to keep driving but it is no longer in his best interest or safe for anyone else. Love is not acquiescing to his anger. Love requires that you take the keys away from him. This will not make you popular. I speak from experience.

One last thing that we often overlook when we talk about the characteristics of authentic love: Christ-like love also requires courage. Jesus had the courage to touch lepers despite religious laws declaring them outcasts. He had the courage to teach women in a patriarchal society which said they were not worthy of learning. He had the courage to say that we are to love not only our friends, but also our enemies. He had the courage to confront corrupt religious authorities who were in collusion with the Romans. And he had the courage to call for the liberation of those who were oppressed.

Do you remember the horrible wildfires that swept through California last November? They were the worst fires in the state's known history, destroying 19,000 structures and killing at least 85 people.

As with most disasters, there were heroes. Among them were thousands of firefighters and law enforcement officers.

Brad Brown was a hospital chaplain in Paradise, California, who risked his life to save others. Rather than hopping into his car and speeding away from the approaching fires, he headed to the hospital to see how he could help. When he arrived, an evacuation was underway. He quickly began helping move patients into ambulances. When they ran out of ambulances, he loaded three patients into his minivan – two from intensive care and one from the hospice unit. He sped away from the hospital, but soon became “stuck for hours in gridlock because cars up ahead had burst into flames... At times, with smoke billowing black, he could not see 20 feet down the road. He recited Scripture to calm his passengers as he inched his car away from flames on one side of the street, then the other, while embers flicked onto the hood.”

As the traffic crawled forward in the blazing inferno, “he called his children to tell them he loved them in case he didn't make it. This was an especially hard call because his teenage daughter and son had lost their mother to cancer five months earlier.”

“After a bulldozer finally moved the cars blocking his path, Brown made it to the parking lot of a church, but the building was engulfed in flames. He was directed toward a larger parking lot, but on his way he faced a wall of fire. He could not see the other side, but he had precious cargo he was trying to save. He paused for a moment and wondered what he should do. Then, he floored it and drove through the flames...He and his three patients escaped the fiery furnace.”³

Jesus said, “I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another.” And he followed with these words: “Everyone will know you are my disciples *if* you love one another.”

Each day this week you will have an opportunity to show others you are one of his followers.

NOTES

1. Aisha Brooks-Lytle, “Living by the Word,” *The Christian Century*, May 19, 2019
2. Michael Lindvall
3. Katy Steinmetz, “A Chaplain Who Drove through Wildfire,” *Time*, December 24-31, 2018, p. 36.