

“How Can You Tell?”

a sermon

by Dan Griswold

Trinity Reformed Church

May 2, 2010

John 13:31–35

Every so often, a friend of mine will finally meet my mother. And what usually happens is immediate recognition. Right away, my friend will see that this person really is my mother and I am really her son. Many of you have met my mom, and you know this to be true: I look quite a bit like her.

The resemblance used to be stronger, I think: when I was younger and thinner. But there still is enough there, in the eyes, in the jawline. People know we are related. It's fairly obvious. I don't have to ask, “How can you tell?”

The same is true, I think, for the Coopers. Moments ago, we celebrated baptism for little Geoffrey. And we all know that he's well on his way to where his brother Matty already finds himself: unable to deny his parentage. How can we tell? Oh, it's just obvious, isn't it?

The words of Jesus that I read a few minutes ago are likewise about a resemblance that should be obvious. He is talking about what should distinguish the Christian. He's saying what should mark one as a follower of Jesus. He's giving an answer, a very important answer, to the question, “How can you tell I'm a Christian?”

Now, I think it's important to notice what his answer doesn't say. He doesn't say that Christians are known by their physical resemblance to Jesus. Of course not. That would be silly. He also doesn't say that Christians are known by their buildings. He doesn't say that they are known by their clothing or jewelry. He doesn't say that they're known by their bumper stickers. It's not by how they talk or by the music they enjoy that Christians are to be recognized, not as Jesus sees it. Perhaps we regret the oversight, but Jesus doesn't even say that Christians are to be known by their politics. None of these things he saw fit to mention as distinguishing the Christian, as being that by which others could just tell one is a follower of Jesus, a disciple of Christ.

No, it's not by any of these things that others should be able to tell that we follow Jesus. These, apparently, are unimportant to Jesus, for he fails to name them when, in preparing his disciples, he tells them how others should know. None of these are the answer, the truly important answer, to the question, “How can you tell I'm a Christian?”

The answer he gives is, seemingly, a very simple answer. How can you tell one's a Christian? You can tell in this way: by the love that person shows to other Christians. “Love one another,” Jesus says. “I give you a new commandment: that you love one another.”

Sounds pretty simple, doesn't it? Jesus wants us to love one another. Hey, we can do that! We know how to love. It's easy. You just be pleasant, and kind. You say nice things to each other. You treat each other with respect. You just ...

Now wait a second. Is it really that easy? Does Jesus really mean something quite that obvious, that within reach? Well, not exactly. For notice what he says right after: "Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another."

Huh. *Just as I have loved you.* That's how the followers of Jesus are supposed to love — as Jesus has loved them. And here we had better do some deep recalling of just what Jesus' love means, how it takes shape, what it does, *what it costs.*

Because Jesus loves at great cost, great sacrifice. His love is shown in his being betrayed. It is shown in suffering. It is shown in death accomplished by enemies who turned on him and by friends who walked away from him.

And this is not simply a shame, a tragedy, a crime, something to be regretted and bewailed. It is in this, the betrayal, the suffering and death of Jesus, that Jesus is — what did he call it? — *glorified.*

Remember, with me, what had happened. Judas leaves the room to betray Jesus, and when he does so, Jesus sums it all up this way: "*Now the Son of Man has been glorified, and God has been glorified in him.*" Which is to say that in *this* — the suffering and dying of Jesus, the self-giving of Jesus, his willingness to go that way — we see who Jesus really is.

And who he is, the character that he has and shares with God, is *love*, and not just any old love, but this very kind of love: a love that gives without thought to comfort or self-preservation, a love that seeks no deserving in the other in order to love but loves all the same, even those who don't deserve the love, the unloving and the unlovable.

That's the love with which Jesus loves. It is the love by which Jesus loves *us*. He has loved us in just this same self-sacrificing, merit-ignoring, sin-covering way.

He has loved the unlovable.

He has blessed the hard-hearted and graced the graceless.

He has chosen, even at personal cost,
to befriend the friendless and unfriendly,
know the ignorant,
lift up the fallen, guide the lost, enrich the poor.

That is his love. And in that love, Jesus tells his followers, "In that very way, just as I have loved you, love one another."

Now, that certainly raises the bar, doesn't it? If Jesus hadn't been so specific, if he hadn't said what kind of love he meant, then we might think that we've got this love thing in the bag. And that's because we count our earthbound forms of love as more than adequate. We tend to equate love with being nice and being polite and avoiding those things that might cause offense.

And, to be sure, these can be part of love, even the love of which Jesus speaks and which he commands. But they are certainly not the sum of this love, so that by being nice, kind, polite, inoffensive people we can be satisfied that we have fulfilled the law of love Jesus gives to us.

No, the love Jesus wants us to show each other is the same love he has shown us. "As I have loved you, so are you to love one another." We are to love in that same way,

blessing the hard-hearted,
gracing the graceless,
befriending the friendless and unfriendly,

knowing the ignorant,
lifting up the fallen,
guiding the lost,
enriching the poor.

That, without a doubt, is how we are to love one another. And right there is another challenging piece to Jesus' commandment. With this love, in this manner, we are to love ... *one another*.

You see, Jesus doesn't tell us to love in general, with a warm fuzzy for humankind. He tells us to be very specific in our love. He wants concrete love, not abstract love. And he wants it to start within the community of faith, among those who see themselves as followers of Jesus.

Of course, Jesus isn't saying that we must *not* love the non-Christian. Instead, I think he knows that we need the specific orientation of the love, we need this focus on the particular. It seems that, for Jesus, there is an order for the exercise of this love. Love *one another* in the same way that Jesus has loved us. That comes first. Other objects and forms of love will follow. But this must come first. We must show Christlike love first of all and primarily to each other before we show it to the rest. We can't neglect each other, even for the sake of good actions toward those who don't believe. But the love that we would show to each other is a sign to all of Christ's love for us, a sign that we truly belong to Jesus.

So it is that I want to lift up for you what I believe is the challenge and blessing scripture has for us this morning. We are to love one another as Jesus has loved us. There is indeed challenge in those words, and there is blessing, too.

We are challenged to love one another in true Christlike manner: giving of the self, even at personal cost, with no thought to repayment, even when the one we should love annoys or grates on the nerves, when our patience is tested and our tolerance strained, even when our offer of loving-kindness is treated not as a precious gift but as a lump of coal.

And yet it is also blessing for us. For it is a blessing to love one another as Christ has loved us, because such love can truly happen here, it is not unknown, it is not unheard of, it is the core of our identity, it is that which distinguishes us, the thing that others notice and upon which they comment. This is blessing, I tell you, for the possibility to love one another as Christ has loved us has surely been given to us, it is here, we have felt it and heard it and seen it. We have known it.

Can't you tell? Can others?