

Mount Olive Lutheran Church
5327 W. Washington Blvd.
Milwaukee, Wisconsin 53208-1798

The Fifth Sunday of Easter
May 2, 2010
John 13:31-35

“Love One Another As You Are Loved”

by Pastor Mark E. Wangerin

Introduction

As I prepared for this Sunday’s services, I discovered that the Gospel lesson for this week had been the basis for a fairly large number of sermons that I had preached. Yet the fact that this is Confirmation Sunday has placed a somewhat different emphasis upon this week than on others when this text has appeared in the three year cycle of readings.

At first glance, the Gospel lesson seems out of place for this Easter season. For the words spoken by our Lord are spoken by him in the upper room on Maundy Thursday before his arrest, trial, and crucifixion. Indeed, the words at the beginning of the text, "When he had gone out" refer to Judas Iscariot who left the company of the disciples to betray his Lord. And the words of Jesus about the new command he would give his disciples, which in the Latin was translated as *mandatum* is the basis for the name of Maundy Thursday. So in many respects this is a Holy Week text, not a text for the Fifth Sunday of Easter. Yet there is much in this text which can be applied and studied at any time of the year and especially in connection with the confirmation of a group of young people. For the main emphasis of our text is upon our loving relationship to one another as seen in the light of the love of the Lord Jesus Christ for us. Therefore our theme for today is “Love One Another as You are Loved.”

I. A Contrast

In this account, Jesus has the attention of His disciples. A dramatic event has just taken place. Judas has left the gathering to be about his evil work. Jesus tells his disciples that now is the Son of Man glorified and God is glorified in Him. They certainly did not see any glory there. Everything was just as it was before. There was no outward show of glory. And even we might have a difficult time understanding these words. As believers who live in the faith of Easter and the resurrection, we would understand Jesus speaking of glory in view of his resurrection, ascension, and seat at the right hand of God in heaven. But here, in this place is there glory?

Yes, for it is clear from Jesus’ words that He considers the cross to be an essential part of His glory. There, in the shame, in the pain, in the death, the Suffering Servant would work out the salvation of sinful man in his sacrificial death. In that way God would glorify Him. Jesus understood it well. The work which He would do upon the cross would glorify Him. So Paul can write, “Far be it from me to glory except in the cross of my Lord Jesus Christ.” Jesus knows the time is at hand. He tells His disciples that he will be with them only a little longer and where He is going they cannot come. It would only be a matter of hours. Judas Iscariot was out bringing the soldiers who would meet up with Jesus in Gethsemane. The way to the

cross lay ahead.

And because of that fact, Jesus tells his disciples of the new command he gives them. In that command is the great contrast--"Love one another just as I have loved you."

II. Agape Love

What a word is here. Yet it may also be a troubling word. Jesus says we are to love one another. What does this mean? Because Jesus speaks of this as a command, many think that this is the way of salvation for the Christian. In loving one another we are saved. But when people say this they forget the other part of the sentence, the foundation for this love. Jesus said, "Just as I have loved you." Jesus is the walking, living, breathing definition of this special love which in Greek is called agape -- a word not so easy to translate except from its use. The most familiar passage where it is used is this one: "God so loved the world that He gave his only Son". Agape is selfless, sacrificial love. The defining act of this love is the gift of God the Father in the sending of His Son and in the self-sacrificing love of the Son of God for the sins of the world. Now that is a tall act to follow. That set the goal very high if you will. Love as I have loved you. Of course, in one sense that is impossible. Only God could love the whole world so completely, so finally, so surely in the giving of His Son, but in that love our love flows forth. We love because He first loved us. Our love can be a reflection of His. So Jesus concludes the Gospel with these words-- "By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another."

In the early church, this was certainly the distinguishing mark of those first Christians. Minucius Felix, a Roman historian wrote of the Christians, "They love each other even without being acquainted with each other." And the scoffer Julian wrote, "Their master has implanted the belief in them that they are all brethren." And in their lives they did the same. When all others fled in the face of the plague it was the Christians who stayed to care for the sick and the dying. When people needed help it was the Christians who so often provided it. By their acts of love, in the face of hatred and persecution and even death, the Christian church transformed and finally overcame the Roman empire itself. So the watchword truly was, "See how they love one another."

Can we say the same today? Sometimes it does not appear that the church truly hears our Lord's command, "Love one another just as I have loved you." But perhaps the reason some do not see it is because they are looking in the wrong place. Or they misunderstand love as simply getting along. We might even be stung by the accusation that we are unloving. But this love that Jesus speaks of is present. We can see it. Or maybe we don't see it because we do it naturally. The kind word of assurance and comfort given to Christian friends in times of need or sorrow. The little things we do without even thinking about it because that is who we are. Maybe we do not realize how much love we show to one another because we have never known any other way. It becomes part of who we are. It is Christ's love made evident in us. For it is true that we are Christ's hands and feet and mouth to so many in our

world.

Of course there are times when our love is not as evident. We are ever mindful of Martin Luther's reminder that we are saints and sinners at the same time and our sinful nature too often shows itself. But though Christians are not perfect they are forgiven as a bumper sticker reminds us. In that forgiveness, in that peace our love flows as a response to the love of God in Christ Jesus our Savior.

III. A Confirmation Prayer

And finally, it should be our prayer for our confirmation class, for our young people who reaffirm their baptismal promises, that they might live in that love just as they first have been loved by Christ. There are many temptations which are around them. Their lives will lead them many places and in many directions. We have no idea what the world into which they are growing up will be like. But we would pray that they would continue to grow in the grace and love of God, that the Word of God would strengthen them, that the blessed sacrament of the Lord's body and blood would be a frequent and fulfilling part of their lives, that they would live in love, the love of Christ. And this is not just for our confirmands, but for all of us as well. For the victorious vision of the Epistle for today is the ever present promise of the victory in our Lord. "Behold, I am making all things new ... It is done! I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end. To the thirsty I will give from the spring of the water of life without payment. The one who conquers will have this heritage and I will be his God and he will be my son." It is done in the one who loved us.

Jesus, thy boundless love for me
No thought can reach no tongue declare
Unite my thankful heart to thee
And reign without a rival there!
Thine wholly, thine alone I am
Be thou alone my constant flame.

In suffering be thy love my peace
In weakness be thy love my power
And when the storms of life shall cease,
O Jesus, in that final hour,
Be thou my rod and staff and guide
And draw me safely to thy side.

In Jesus' Name. Amen.