

LOVE ONE ANOTHER

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Union Congregational Church, United Church of Christ

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It's hard to say goodbye. It's hard to know that you are at the end of something, especially when it has been really good and especially when wonderful relationships have been formed. It is never easy or comfortable to imagine the other side of what is ending – the not knowing what lies ahead instead of what you are leaving behind.

According to the gospel of John, Jesus is beginning to say farewell to his disciples. He knows it but they don't yet understand that this is farewell.

As we move through these weeks of the Easter season, our scriptures like this one, take us back in Jesus' ministry to re-explore the stories that occurred before his trial, death, and resurrection. We hear again, words and teaching stories that he shared with his disciples. Having resurrection fresh in our minds, we look back at these stories with AHA's saying to ourselves, 'I could see that coming' - when at least in the disciple's minds, life is good, following Jesus is so exciting, hearing the stories is confusing and at the same time awesome! For the disciples, life was exciting with no real worries. Growing in faith and learning more and more about the kingdom of God that Jesus showed them in so many ways was transforming. They had the zeal of discipleship.

So, back to our scripture story for today – the farewell. Jesus is gathering with his disciples – it is just before the Passover celebration – Jesus has washed their feet and now they are excited to share this meal together – and only Jesus knows the betrayal, the doubting, the horror of what lies ahead.

Only Jesus knows that this is farewell – that his days on earth are numbered – and even the simplest of disciples could count on their hands the number of days. But they weren't counting – they were still living high on the faith Jesus taught. Only Jesus knew what they didn't know – and what he knew they would need to know to make it through and beyond the events that lay ahead. Jesus – only Jesus – knew that this was farewell. And perhaps that's why the disciples were once again so clueless.

Perhaps too, that is why Jesus set aside his usual teaching method of telling a parable – one of those stories about one thing – to teach another idea. Today, when time is running out, today, when it is imperative that these followers – tomorrow's leaders – need to know the most important thing to carry on Jesus' ministry – really the only important thing – Jesus simply tells them: "Love one another – as I have loved you – love one another."

Of course, he's told it before in parable and example. Didn't he tell it when he shared the story of the man set upon and left for dead by bandits - and no one would help - until the hated Samaritan came by and went above and beyond the call to help. Jesus said, 'this is love.' Didn't he tell it with the story of the young man requesting his share of the family farm in cash and then wasting it until he was destitute – and upon coming home, his father cried out with love, welcoming him back without even setting conditions? Didn't he show it with the healings and the dinners and the friends he chose?

And still, Jesus knew, they didn't get it. It seems so simple, doesn't it? "Love one another." And it is – kind of. What makes it so much harder is the second part, Love one another – as - I - have – loved - you." Jesus loves unconditionally. Jesus loves the stranger. Jesus loves the unlovable. Jesus loves the ones others don't love.

Jesus loves the poor, the oppressed, the diseased, the questioning, the doubting, the clueless... And what Jesus commands is, "Love one another, as I have loved you."

Jesus says this is a new commandment – but it isn't really, is it? Way back in the Bible, are commands to love, to love God, to love neighbor, to love parents, to love children, to love the unlovable. So, what makes this command new? It's Jesus. When Jesus invites – commands his disciples to love as he has loved them, he is inviting them into a journey of bringing love to the very center of their lives. It is not simply by being nice that we love. It isn't simply doing acts of charity. It isn't just giving nice gifts to one another. It isn't being a martyr for our faith. Jesus doesn't talk about the importance of scriptures or creeds or even the list of the ten commandments as the way to show love. Jesus intends loving as he loves to be not about belief, but about practice. It is about receiving grace from God to do love – acts of love – over and over- to help bring about the world of peace and justice – shalom – love - that God envisions.

Jesus intended that this kind of loving would be a process – a journey – a series of faith practices repeated over and over leading to personal transformation – and in the process – the transformation of the world as we know it – bringing the kingdom of God into reality.

On this last Sunday of the Sunday School year, we are reminded of the importance of faith formation as the way of life-long learning. We are reminded that we grow in faith by practicing our love of God, following the teachings of Jesus, loving ourselves, and loving others the way that Jesus loved us.

We also know that faith is caught more easily than it is taught. The love we share – the love we embody – the love we give – shows others what it means to be a disciple of Christ.

This is how everyone will recognize you, Jesus said - by the way you love. They will know we are Christians by our love. By our love. Not our creeds or beliefs or church buildings or tithing or bylaws or rules – only by our love – loving one another the way Jesus loved us.