

Hillcrest Congregational Church, UCC  
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Acts 11:1-18, John 13: 31-38  
Love One Another

Today we receive a new commandment from Jesus- love one another.

Hmmm. Isn't that something we are already supposed to be doing?

You all know the story. When Jesus was asked, "what is the most important commandment?" he answered, " 'you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength.' The second is this, 'you shall love your neighbor as yourself.'" (Mark 12:30-31a). These commandments were from the Torah and everyone knew them. So why would Jesus give his disciples a "new commandment" to love one another?

Let us remember where we are. Four weeks have gone by since Jesus was crucified and resurrected. According to our tradition, the disciples experienced the presence of Jesus for 40 days. He spent time reminding them of all he had taught them about the kingdom of God (Acts 1:3). We can imagine that these were very heady days. Threat, arrest, crucifixion, loss of their beloved teacher, near arrest of the disciples- they could have died! And then seeing Jesus again, knowing he would stay among them only a little while. Joyous last days being reminded of who they belonged to.

So they would have been reminded to love one another. But that is not what Jesus said, is it? He 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 how did he love them? Great life giving love. Love that sacrificed everything he was. His love meant he gave his very life for them. If they were to love each other as he loved them, what did this love mean and require of them? What does that love require of us? We see one small slice of meaning in our story about Peter.

Peter has had an amazing experience of God’s grace among Gentiles- people who were unclean according to what he had been taught. He is called on the carpet by the other disciples and his story reads like legal testimony, because Peter is on trial! So he goes and he recounts it step by step.

Peter tells them about his dream- three times he hears God’s voice telling him to go and eat unclean animals. (Three is Peter’s magic number because he denied Jesus three times.) Then he finds that Cornelius, the person he visits has also had an angel visit and tell him about Peter. Then Peter tells them the Holy Spirit fell upon them just as it did upon us! Remember the words of Jesus- “you shall be baptized with the Holy Spirit...God gave them the same gift! He concludes, “who was I that I could withstand God?”

Well, our story concludes with the disciples all falling silent. If God has accepted those unclean Gentiles, who are they to argue? And Jesus gave them and

us a new commandment. “Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.” Jesus knew challenges would come and that the disciples would need the reminder to love each other, not argue amongst them selves.

So what can we glean from these stories today? How do we connect them with our lives? First we ask ourselves the question, who is it that Jesus, and God call us to love as we have been loved? Who are the Gentiles in our midst today? Who are the people who are different, perhaps in language and culture and religious tradition? Who are the people we will not associate with?

I have two stories to share. As a child, I was riding in an elevator with my aunt and two older women who appeared to be enjoying each other’s company. I imagined that they were also aunt and niece. The elderly woman spoke in a language that was not English. I was fascinated and wondered what language she was speaking, what culture they came from, and what she were saying.

When we got off the elevator my aunt said, “That is just awful! If she is going to come here she should learn to speak English!” I asked why. The response was, “what if she was talking about us?” I wondered why two perfect strangers would care to talk about us. I asked what I thought was a reasonable question, “what if nobody taught her or what she is too old to learn?” That just

made my aunt angrier. I was certainly not enjoying being with her! I really wished I could join those two ladies who did seem to be enjoying being together.

But instead of paranoia and anger, what stuck in my head was that I felt sorry for my aunt and her fear. I realized that people are not all the same! There were different cultures and languages, and wasn't that fascinating?! What if I could learn about and make friends with people who were different?! I wondered about my aunt's fear, and my impulse to make and love new friends.

My second story comes from memories of my grandmother. She was a lady, very quiet, reserved and passive. In 18 years I had never seen her argue or heard her raise her voice in anger, until one day...I heard her loud and clear that day.

My family was a foster family for many children. The child living with us then was an adorable black toddler that everyone loved. The neighbors next door were the only people in the neighborhood who were the same age as my grandmother, and I know she enjoyed having them as friends. That day she was standing talking to the lady when Keith toddled up to her. The woman said to my grandmother, "I do not know how you can you stand living with that N."

Well my quiet, demure, tiny little grandma did not let that one go by. She replied at the top of her lungs, "I do not ever want to hear you say anything like that again. No one deserves to be treated that way. Keith did not choose the color

of his skin and there is nothing wrong with it. He is a child of God and you will treat him that way or I will never speak to you again.”

Gram earned her stripes that day. But it cost her. When she told me what had happened, she was angry and shaking. She was ashamed of her anger, ashamed that she had shouted. She had lost a friend, lost her cool, lost her identity as a lady. She was afraid she hadn't been a very “loving Christian” to her neighbor. But I was proud. Proud that she stood up for and loved a child who had no one in the world but our family, and whose skin was the color God made it to be. I was proud that she stood up to a bigot, set a standard for her behavior, and set an example of love. And so proud that she was my grandma.

We each have our own stories, our own prejudices, our own challenges, our own Gentiles to meet. This week the state of Arizona has taken one approach. Out of fear they have decided that undocumented people will be arrested and punished. And in the process they require all of us to carry our papers.

Who are the Gentiles in our midst today? Who are the people who are different, perhaps in language, culture, socio-economic status, skin color, ability and religious tradition? Who are the people we will not associate with?

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.” Jesus calls us to great life giving love. Love that sacrifices everything. If we are to love each other as he and

God love us, what does that love require of us? It requires we give up our fear, and surrender to love with all that we have and all that we are. That is how people will know whose disciples we are. May it be so. Amen.