

John 13:31-35 – “See The Love”

Ah, wonderful images of sitting around the family table. Norman Rockwell images of families gathered at table at Christmas, at Easter, at Thanksgiving. Perfectly cooked and served food, perfectly structured people sitting around a table laid out perfectly. Perfect hairdos, perfect smiles. Perfect conversation conducted quietly, one at a time, in order. Even the grace to bless this house is articulated perfectly. Perfect!

And then there are the wonderful images of sitting around the family table at our house, even at Christmas, at Easter, at Thanksgiving. Never sure of exactly who will be there. Never sure if we really want some of them to be there! A disparate collection of different people, I mean really different people, creating a noise and a ruckus as tons of food, hours in the preparation, is thrown down throats in a matter of minutes. Some of you have experienced this, and can attest to it. Probably the rest of you can at least relate, remembering back to family get-togethers you have experienced.

Most of today's family get-togethers are pretty good, for the most part low-stress affairs (although as I said, it depends on who all is there!) with lots of noise and great conversation as we catch up on who's doing what, and where.

Great memories abound of other times spent around the table. Maritimers and Newfies are notorious for gathering around the kitchen table, drinking tea strong enough to corrode a normal pot, and scoffing scones and cheddar cheese and partridge berry jam, and talking and laughing and carrying on. On a trip many years ago we were invited to spend a few days with some nice folks in Glovertown in Newfoundland, and we met the entire population sitting at Skip and Betty's kitchen table. (Ostensibly they were all looking for the town shovel, but it was pretty clear they wanted to see these aliens from 'away'!) The kitchen table in just about any farmhouse in Canada is similarly a gathering place to exchange information and pleasantries and great memories.

However, not all table gatherings haven't been that pleasant. Any of you who are also an adult child of alcoholic parents can relate with me to the "Saturday night special", the usual Saturday night dinner. Most often served late, at a time judged least explosive, and thus usually overcooked. A meal with more underlying coiled-spring tension than a mattress, starting off normally enough although with a perceptible and even palpable over politeness. And of course, the inevitable outburst and emotional explosion, turning the quickly-eaten food to a lump of concrete in your stomach. An experience that totally shatters the Norman Rockwell happy, happy picture of the perfect family.

Now, carry that across to the around-the-table scene from the gospel, and likewise shatter the perfect picture that usually comes to mind when we think about the Last Supper. Almost always when we hear the term 'Last Supper' some beautiful picture, inspired by a great Middle Ages painter, comes to mind, with all the disciples attentive, Jesus in the center with a beatific smile – the perfect Last Supper. But we have to remember that it was a 'family' gathering, complete with all the dysfunctions that any family brings to table. It was a new and different kind of family, to be sure, but then again aren't all families new and different as time goes on? We know the disciples were there, faithful friends who had spent the last thousand days in close company with this strange and compelling man, and so we quickly assume that there was nobody else there other than the classic Twelve, an assumption that cannot be sustained either from the text or from common sense. This was a supper for a large group of people in a tight new relationship, with all of the noise and confusion that attends such a gathering. Trips to and from the kitchen. Shuffling as people rearrange themselves. Friendly arguments about who said what to whom and when. Calls to "pass the bread, pass the wine, pass the lamb".

An unusual 'family', but a family none the less, and a true family supper gathering, complete with the head of the family holding forth with the sagest of wisdom while the black sheep was quietly

sabotaging the whole thing. Quietly, perhaps, but not anonymously, as Jesus not only predicted that one amongst them would betray him but identified the very person, Judas, who would do so. Nobody at the table, John's gospel tells us, understood at the time why Jesus said what he said to Judas, and isn't that the way it so often goes? We see or hear something in the noise and commotion but don't completely catch it, and miss the implication of what just happened.

That's the setting for our gospel reading – Jesus and his new 'family' gathered at the supper table, a family supper as noisy and confusing and dysfunctional as any we experience. Judas has just left, and now in the awkward silence, Jesus drops a bombshell. "Little children, I am with you only a little longer. You will look for me, and as I said to the Jews so now I say to you, 'Where I am going, you cannot come.'" Wow! If I weren't a Presbyterian and could gamble, I'd bet serious coin that there wasn't a sound in the room at that moment. Not a dropped spoon, not a rattled dish, maybe some noise filtering through from the kitchen, but not even a cough. You know how such a stunning pronouncement would silence the entire room, as the people gathered there tried to take in the impact of what he had just said. Oh, the noise would flood back in to fill the void, and it does, with Peter characteristically the first and the loudest. But for the moment, dead silence, eerily forecasting the time to come, echoing the silence of the empty tomb.

And into that silence Jesus drops perhaps his greatest instruction and command to those who would call themselves followers of him, "love one another, just as I have loved you."

Now a lot of people think this is a command to love everybody, but it's not. To be sure, there are lots of other times and ways Jesus makes it clear that we are indeed called to love everybody. But this is family talk, around the family table. This command to love one another given here is for family, for the church family, a fact made clear by his explanation and reasoning that immediately follows, "by this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another." The followers of Christ are being called here to love one another first, so that everyone can see that love. This is family talk, around the family table, from the head of the family, the new family, the church.

Now you would think (unless you're part of the family) that the church family wouldn't need to hear this, eh? But they did. And we do. This message was a most appropriate command, and John's reminder to the early church of the message was needed. As the church grew, and faced new and unseen challenges and obstacles there was plenty of opportunity to display anything but love. Politics within the church reared its ugly head right away, as Paul struggled with Peter and James the brother of Jesus and the rest of the gang at the corporate headquarters of the family firm "Jesus, Inc." in Jerusalem. Conflicts arose between the faithful and the society around them, but that was to be expected. What was less expected but no less real was the conflict that grew within individual congregations, as we hear in Paul's letters to congregations he knew well. Cultural transitions, religious abrasions, sheer personality differences all seemed reason enough to escalate tension into conflict. Time and again it was necessary to inject into the strife and dissention and conflict within the family, "love one another, as I have loved you, that everyone may see you are my disciples."

It's no different today, as we still can easily bring to mind those places where within the Christian family we see 'un-love' at work, causing tension, conflict, and pain. The root causes are not much different if at all from the early days – personalities and personal preferences being held as being above the common good. The struggle of wrestling with the abrasions of encounter with other faiths and religious beliefs. The shame of sin exposed within the church, behaviours of broken and abused relationships exactly at opposites from Jesus' commandment to love one another – sexual, economic, psychological and religious oppression and abuse. The all-too-easy trap of objectifying people, escalating differences of race, ethnicity, economic or regional background into walls and barriers of fear, driving wedges between parts of the same family. It's easy enough, especially in but not limited to the Presbyterian church, to think of congregations that are dwindling away, sailing off into obscurity

on the good ship “Irrelevance”, muttering around their table that they really need more people, but quietly adding the deathly criteria, “just like us”.

But thank God, literally “thank God!”, that Jesus’ words have not gone totally unheeded. For there are those across these past two thousand years who have heard his command, “love one another as I have loved you”, and have taken it to heart, and who have tried to be faithful to it and to him. The proof is in the existence of the church today, a family that grew to cover much of the known world, with all of the varied characteristics you would expect in any family: some quiet, some loud and brash; some thoughtful and reflective, others who would act first and think later; some dull and boring, others wildly flagrant and exciting in their behaviour; some good and some less good and yes, even some really black sheep. Some so engrossed in loving themselves they wouldn’t even let outsiders look in, let alone come in; some so engrossed in making sure outsiders saw love in them that they were blind to the unloving practices inside.

But the church has persevered, and persevered in loving one another, just as Jesus commanded, and more importantly demonstrated with his death and resurrection. “What love is this?”, the hymnist asks, and indeed how can we begin to understand the depth of love shown to us by Jesus. I think that’s part of what the movie the Passion of the Christ was trying to say, to convey the depth of his love by the depth of his suffering, but sacrificial death is only part of the story. “What better gift than that a man lay down his life for another?” is the oft-quoted saying, and it’s true that for humans there can be no greater gift. But it’s also true that there is an answer to that question, and that is the gift of life eternal given to us by the one who not only laid down his life, but took it up again in victory over even death itself that we might have life abundant and eternal. A love so powerful that it even redeems us and allows us to stand tall in the presence of God; a love so complete it can and does and has overcome our weaknesses and failures and shortcomings, making us blameless in Christ’s love.

And I’m happy to say that in the church today we can see the love that Christ called for. There are congregations where the healing and redeeming love of Christ flows freely, where ethnic and cultural barriers are set aside and there is no longer female or male, Greek or Jew, old or young, rich or poor, but only members of the family of God united in Christ Jesus.

I’m even happier to say that Central is one such congregation, and I think we have a unique role and opportunity to play within the family. I believe that the church is facing, and will soon face even more, a huge upheaval brought about by the changing nature of the world. Gone are the days of ethnic and cultural isolation, where congregations could isolate themselves as islands of some ethnic ‘purity’, and the church will struggle again to understand how to live and survive and witness in a multicultural and multifaith world. We’re doing just that, and with some success, as we continue to work with Galilee Church, learning from each other, loving each other. And now we are entering into a shared project with our Vancouver Taiwanese congregation, who used to be here but now use the facilities at Kerrisdale Church. Both of these congregations provide active support for our Community Breakfast program, along with Christ Alive congregation, who’s support has been invaluable! The Taiwanese have a group called appropriately enough, ‘Agape’, which is a Greek word for ‘love’ that as a mission project has assembled some 20,000 personal toiletry kits to be handed out at the breakfasts! Because we are loving one another, and cooperating in mission, there will be a huge number of people who will through also being loved know that we are disciples of Christ.

As spectacular as it is, that is but one example of how by loving one another within the church family, and by understanding how that family, like most families, is fluid and dynamic and constantly changing, we can adapt our concept of what loving one another means. There are many more, and by these examples, others will see the love we live, and know that they are welcome to share in that love, and become one with us as part of the family of Christ. They will know us as, and we will in faith declare ourselves to be, disciples of Christ Jesus, our Lord, who first loved us.