

The Old made New

John 13:31-35

“You have heard it said.” Jesus used this phrase multiple times in His Sermon on the Mount. He referenced the Mosaic laws that the people were very familiar with, only to turn those familiarities on their heads.

Hear these familiar verses from Matthew 5:

²¹ “You have heard that it was said to the people long ago, ‘You shall not murder, and anyone who murders will be subject to judgment.’ ²² But I tell you that anyone who is angry with a brother or sister will be subject to judgment...

²⁷ “You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall not commit adultery.’

²⁸ But I tell you that anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart...

³⁸ “You have heard that it was said, ‘Eye for eye, and tooth for tooth.’

³⁹ But I tell you, do not resist an evil person. If anyone slaps you on the right cheek, turn to them the other cheek also...

⁴³ “You have heard that it was said, ‘Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ ⁴⁴ But I tell you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you,”

Jesus spoke often about love. When asked about which was the greatest commandment, his response was once again about love:

³⁷ Jesus replied: “‘Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.’ ³⁸ This is the first and greatest commandment. ³⁹ And the second is like it: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’ ⁴⁰ All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments.” Matthew 22:37-40

So, one might wonder why the Scriptures we read this morning are titled “A new commandment” in some Bible translations. It is because, He gives a commandment to love, not unlike the Mosaic law, but again with a twist – the disciples are to love one another *as He has loved them*. The love of Jesus is like no other and He expects the disciples to emulate Him after he is gone.

Jesus had already spent time during the meal listening to his disciples argue about who will be the greatest in God’s kingdom. He is aware they are still missing the point of his ministry. So, He sets an example for the disciples by washing their feet. All of them. Knowing that one of them would betray him and another deny him. He humbled himself, lowering himself to the level of a servant before the disciples. They understood that something was happening, even if they weren’t sure what it was.

They were all familiar with the Mosaic law to love your neighbor. As set out in Deuteronomy and Leviticus, the law of love required that the resident cared

for the alien, those who had resources were to care of those who did not, orphans and widows could expect to have benefactors. In each of these scenarios there was one party who had power and one party who was dependent on that power. Over time these structures had come to be abused. Now Jesus, the power party in this scenario, flipped those roles to become the powerless party in service to others. He became a servant to his servants.

The command to love still stood in this new iteration of the Mosaic law, but now it had been fine tuned. The disciples were not just to love as they were told to under the old law, they were now to love as Jesus had loved them. And how had he loved them? By becoming their servant. He did not lord his authority, divine as it was, over them. He had dropped to his knees, bearing a basin and a towel, to wash the dirty feet of His followers.

How must the disciples have felt after spending half the night arguing about who was the greatest to then have the greatest person in the room lower Himself to the level of a servant? Jesus upset their understanding of what true greatness is. He had been telling them about his impending death, how in His death God would be glorified, and then he washed their feet. That was the love they were to share with one another, a love of equality and fidelity. After Jesus' death and resurrection, that kind of love would sustain them through the difficult times ahead.

It was that kind of love that motivated the early Anabaptist martyr, Dirk Willems, to do what he is most famous for. In case you are not familiar with his story here it is:

Willems was born in Asperen, Gelderland, Netherlands. He was rebaptized as a young man in Rotterdam, thus rejecting the infant baptism practiced at that time by both Catholics and established Protestants in the Netherlands... This action, plus his continued devotion to his new faith and the baptism of several other people in his home, led to his condemnation by the Roman Catholic Church in the Netherlands and subsequent arrest in Asperen in 1569.

Willems was held in a residential palace turned into a prison, from which he escaped using a rope made out of knotted rags. Using this, he was able to climb out of the prison onto the frozen moat. A guard noticed his escape and gave chase. Willems was able to traverse the thin ice of a frozen pond, because of his lighter weight after subsisting on prison rations. However, the pursuing guard fell through the ice and yelled for help as he struggled in the icy water. Willems turned back to save the life of his pursuer, and thus was recaptured. His erstwhile pursuer stated his desire to let Willems go, but the burgomaster "reminded the pursuer of his oath", causing the pursuer to seize Willems.

Willems was thereafter held until he was condemned by a group of seven judges, who, quoting Willems' "persisting obstinately in his

opinion", ordered that he be burned at the stake on 16 May 1569, as well as that all his property be confiscated "for the benefit of his royal majesty". (Wikipedia)

Despite the danger to himself, Dirk chose to love as Jesus loved. While we may never have to decide between freedom in front of us and a pursuing prison guard behind us, the point is made. Christ loved us with his whole life. As His followers, we are to practice that same kind of self-emptying love with others. This is a challenge in a world that has become terribly partisan. We are called, as followers of Jesus, to see the value in all people, to meet them where they are, and to speak His peace into all our interactions with others. Despite our differing points of view and disagreements, we are called to remember that none of us is too great to stoop to wash the feet of another.

I ask that you think on this question this week: What might the world look like today if we all learned to love others as Jesus loved us?

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