

FIFTH SUNDAY OF EASTER

John 13:33-34

It was Sunday morning and the choir had just finished singing an anthem. The minister was already in the pulpit and as he opened his mouth to speak, a teenage girl stepped out from the front row of the choir, walked down the steps of the sanctuary, and with her choir robes gently flowing behind her, continued down the aisle. Everyone, including the minister stared. They thought she was leaving, and were beginning to feel a little awkward that a choir member should walk out just before the sermon.

But she wasn't leaving. She walked half way down the church, slid into a pew, sat next to her friend and put her arm around her.

She had seen her friend come in late and was sitting by herself.

Twelve hours earlier her friend's mother had died after suffering a long illness. As the choir member sat next to her friend and gently hugged her, those in the congregation smiled and shed small tears of joy, of love, for the friend who showed Christ's love through a simple act of companionship. She risked causing a distraction to serve a friend.

Then the minister broke the silence saying, "I was going to preach on Jesus' command to love one another as He has loved us, but that sermon has just been delivered in a much more powerful way" and he announced the next hymn.

Jesus says, "I give you a new commandment: love one another.

As I have loved you, so you must love one another. If you have love for one another, then everyone will know that you are My

disciples”. We’ve probably heard dozens of sermons, devotions and Bible studies on these words, and yet, what Jesus says here remains us of the most difficult things He asks His followers to do.

What did Jesus mean by love, and how did Jesus love people? It follows that if we can answer this, and the better we understand Jesus’ love, the more we will know what true love is all about. We need only look at how Jesus accepted and respected people, regardless of their position in the community. It made no difference to Jesus what kind of background the person had, that person was still someone who needed, not to be put down, not to be looked down on, not to be ignored, but was a unique and precious child of God. No matter what their condition, or what their sin, each person was of great value to their Creator, and was loved and respected by Jesus.

Jesus’ love for these people was not simply a warm fuzzy feeling, but He put Himself out there for them. He stood alongside, embraced, and welcomed those who were considered morally corrupt, outsiders and outcasts, those condemned for their shameful lives, or for their seeming guilt because of the diseases they carried in their bodies. He stood with these people, healing them and forgiving them. Jesus didn’t care what others thought, because all He could see were people who needed to know that someone cared; that God cared; that they were precious and dearly loved.

The teenager who walked from the choir down to where her friend sat, didn’t care that she was holding up the service, and that people would glare and disapprove of the disruption. It took a great deal of courage, but she didn’t care, because all she could see at that moment was a person who needed to experience Jesus’ love in her grief, and she was going to do something

about it.

The kind of love that Jesus had was sacrificial. Throughout His ministry, his own safety and comfort were always last. And then there was the cross, the ultimate symbol of loving sacrifice. He gave all that He had, and that included His own life, because of His love for all humanity, because of His love for us.

So what does it mean to love one another in the same way that Jesus has loved us? Let's be clear who Jesus is talking to. He is speaking to His disciples, "I give you a new commandment: love one another". He is also saying this to us, the people of the church, "Love one another as I have loved you".

In the letters of the New Testament we find the words "one another" again and again. From these words we learn what it means to love as Christ has loved us; what it means to have the same attitude, or the same mind, as Christ. We are told to let love make us serve one another, accept one another as Christ has accepted us, carry one another's burdens, be tolerant of one another, be kind and tender-hearted toward one another, forgive one another, be subject to one another, be humble towards one another, always considering others better than ourselves, look out for one another's interests, encourage one another, help one another every day, share our belongings with one another, do good to one another and to all people, be at peace with one another, pray for one another, open our homes to one another, show respect for one another. We also have the "do nots": do not criticize one another, do not judge one another, do not complain against one another, and so on.

There are people who don't like us, who hate us, and who disagree with us, some of them might be in the church, and some might be in the community. They may treat us with contempt, put us down, ignore us, make us feel bad. There may be times

when people in the congregation will upset us, and our natural reaction would be to return as good as we are given, and turn our backs on those we dislike and disagree with. There may be times when we will want to be selfish and self-centered and if we don't get our own way, then it's easy to walk away.

There is no way around it, there is no other alternative, the only response that a Christian can give is to love in the same sacrificial, forgiving, accepting, generous way as Jesus did.

There are no exceptions; there is no room for an eye for an eye; no argument for turning your back on a fellow-Christian; no room for intolerance, impatience and rudeness; no reason for walking away because we have been offended.

As we leave this worship service today, may the Holy Spirit guide us as we encourage one another in love. If we have love for one another, then everyone will know that we are His disciples.

AMEN.