By this they will know
John 13:31-35
May 18, 2025

They have come to Jerusalem, right to the doorstep of the Sanhedrin, the Jewish ruling council, right to the doorstep of the regional headquarters of the Roman Empire. They have come ostensibly for the Passover Festival, but a larger story, a story Jesus wholly anticipates, but his disciples little understand, is already unfolding. Tensions are high; the religious authorities are actively seeking information about Jesus' whereabouts, so they might arrest him and solve the Jesus problem once and for all. But rather than lie low, Jesus has deliberately poked the elephant by entering the city. So now, while they are still together, while they still have time, Jesus shares with his closest followers some urgent parting words.

I give you a new commandment, that you love one another.

Huh? Run that by me again? A new commandment? Does anybody else find Jesus' words rather puzzling?

Isn't the command to love one of the oldest commandments, one of the bedrock expectations of the people of God? And Jesus himself, when asked, cited love for neighbor as the most important of all the commandments alongside unmitigated love for God. So how is this commandment — love one another — new?

Is it new because it must be repeated, love always made new day after day after day? Just because you made your bed yesterday doesn't mean you don't need to be reminded to make it again today. Is Jesus' command new simply because it must be said again?

Well … Not very convincing, is it?

The best sense I can make of this saying, taking a hint from Rudolph Bultmann, is that the command is new because it is given in a new context. Jesus will soon be with them no more, at least not in the same way. The age of incarnation — watching Jesus lay his hands on the eyes of a blind man or sit in conversation with a woman beside a well, listening to Jesus talk about light and truth, living bread and living water, feeling Jesus' touch as he washes your feet and dries them with a towel — that age will give way to the age of inspiration, when Jesus will not be with his followers in body, but in and through the Spirit which he will breathe into them.

In the new age, this new Easter age, Jesus will be made manifest through us, through his followers. And this is how everybody will know for sure that we belong to Jesus, this is how everybody will know Jesus: by our love for one another. That's the urgency. That's the reason the command is new. In this new age, love must be clearly seen if Jesus is to be clearly seen. Love is the distinctive mark of followers of Jesus. They will know we are Christians by our love.

Love is the distinctive mark of the followers of Jesus! Yes? Shouldn't it be obvious? But it is not! On all sides — why must there be "sides" at all? — on all sides, we get caught up in theological debate and cultural debate and political debate, each trying to push our own version of the Christian agenda to the forefront. But Jesus says "by this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love." Love is the agenda. Love is the distinctive mark: not moral purity, not doctrinal purity, not ideological purity, but purity of heart — the way, the genuine and straightforward and unfettered way, we open our hearts to each other.

Like Francis. Francis died on my birthday. Jorge Mario Bergoglio, Pope Francis, died twenty-seven days ago after serving as global leader of the Roman Catholic Church for twelve years.

I do not know what you thought of Francis. He was an outspoken advocate for peace, relentlessly calling for the cessation of hostilities and mercy for victims in Gaza, Ukraine, Syria, and Sudan. He was an outspoken advocate for the poor, not merely encouraging acts of charity, but calling out the structural and ideological systems that both create and perpetuate economic inequality. He ruffled the feathers of many church conservatives by making overtures to the LGBTQ community and to the community of women in church leadership roles. But he failed to satisfy church progressives by not pushing hard enough for structural and doctrinal changes in the church's laws regarding such communities.

But, for me, Francis' most powerful impact and enduring legacy are not about anything he did or did not do, but about the kind of human being he was, the kind of follower of Jesus he was.

Francis was simple, living a genuinely simple life. He chose to live in a modest apartment instead of the papal palace. He cooked his own meals. He used public transportation.

Francis was humble, profoundly humble. At his inauguration, he chose to be seated alongside the other cardinals, instead of being elevated above them. He visited in prisons. He mingled with homeless men and women in the city of Rome dressed as a regular priest. He kissed the forehead of a man horribly disfigured by a genetic skin disease. He washed and kissed the feet of a Muslim woman.

Francis was unparochial, deliberately unparochial, making numerous trips to Africa, South American, central Europe, the Philippines, to many places little visited, if at all, by previous popes.

Francis had what I would describe as a certain lightness of being. not taking himself too seriously, not taking too seriously what others considered matters of grave importance, matters of church doctrine, church tradition, church etiquette, precisely because he did take loving Jesus seriously. He often answered questions about contentious issues with an enigmatic ambiguity, not because he did not care, but because he did. He cared about the people. If we must err, err on the side of grace, err on the side of love, even at the risk of getting it wrong. Love covers a multitude of sins. That comes from the Bible! Love is the distinctive mark. That comes from Jesus.

We are able to be humble, we are able to have such lightness of being, we are able to live with joy, when we remember that we are not in charge. God is. The fate of the world is not in our hands. Nor is our own fate. When we know we are held moment of moment by moment in the hands of God, we may live with freedom and with joy and with laughter, not scared of getting it wrong, not scared of failing, not scared of losing, and, may I say it, not scared of death.

In the first year of his papacy, Francis published an exhortation entitled, *Evangelii Gaudium*, the gospel of joy. I read it and was quite taken by it and ended up preaching an eight-part Epiphany sermon series on it. Now I am not going to give you all eight sermons this morning, but I do want to celebrate Francis' life and honor what I hope will be his lasting legacy, not merely among Roman Catholics, but among followers of Jesus all around the globe, by sharing with you a few of my favorite quotes from that work.

Evangelii Gaudium is a missionary manifesto, a call for followers of Jesus to bring Good News to a world that sorely needs to hear it. Good news! Francis says our "message [should] concentrate on the essentials, on what is most beautiful, most grand, most appealing," that is, on grace and mercy and love, not on a plethora of doctrines and moral issues to be stridently imposed. Francis writes that too often …

> *we act as arbiters of grace rather than its facilitators. But the Church is not a tollhouse; it is the house of the Father, where there is a place for everyone …*

There is a place for everyone. To which "everyone" do you suppose Francis is referring? Everyone! "Everyone can share in some way in the life of the Church," he writes, "everyone can be part of the community." As we like to say in the United Church of Christ: "No matter who you are or where you are on life's journey, you are welcome here."

But if these words are to hold meaning, we must open the doors, both literally and figuratively. The doors of the sacraments should not be closed "for simply any reason," Francis declares. The Eucharist "is not a prize for the perfect but a powerful medicine and nourishment for the weak."

The implications of Francis' statements are astounding. Everyone can share in the life of the church. Everyone can be a part of the community. The doors of the sacraments should not be closed. As is typical of Francis, he does not elaborate, does not list any specific proposals about changing church practices around access to the Eucharist. Instead he draws attention to its gracious intent — it is a table where wounds are healed, where are sins forgiven, where enemies are reconciled, where the lost and lonely are welcomed home. Do you think if you or I stepped up to receive the host or the wine from Francis, non-Catholics that we are, he would deny us? Would he deny anyone? Would Jesus turn any away from the table which is his?

Francis calls the Church to open its doors, so that all may come in, and so that we may go out. He writes:

I prefer a Church which is bruised, hurting and dirty because it has been out on the streets, rather than a Church which is unhealthy from being confined and from clinging to its own security.

More than by fear of going astray, my hope is that we will be moved by the fear of remaining shut up within structures which give us a false sense of security, within rules that make us harsh judges, within habits which make us feel safe, while at our door people are starving and Jesus does not tire of saying to us: "Give them something to eat …"

This how how everyone will know that we are Jesus' disciples: not by our ardent defense of his name and reputation, not by keeping ourselves untainted by the ills and temptations of this world, but by our mercy, by our charity, by our love. This requires courage. This requires humility. This requires taking ourselves less seriously and taking Jesus more seriously.

Evangelii Gaudium celebrates the beauty of the gospel, the beauty of its message, but it also celebrates the beauty all around us and within us, and the beauty that comes from us, all of which are gospel, too. Francis writes:

Proclaiming Christ means showing that to believe and to follow him is not only something right and true, but also something beautiful, capable of filling life with new splendor and profound joy, even in the midst of difficulties. Every expression of true beauty can thus be acknowledged as a path leading to an encounter with the Lord Jesus.

Every expression of true beauty! Music, poetry, art, dance, sculpture, theatre, architecture, ritual. What have I left out? Beauty is a path that leads to Jesus. Beauty is a path that points us to God. Beauty is the way of God in the world, and beauty is the way we honor and please God and make ourselves to be like God in this world.

All kinds of beauty, beauty in as many different forms as the many different peoples and cultures that make up our human race. Francis writes:

In the diversity of peoples who experience the gift of God, each in accordance with its own culture, the Church expresses her genuine [unity] and shows forth the "beauty of her varied face."

Wow! "The beauty of her varied face." I love that. The true God, the living God, the God not made in our image but we in God's, is reflected not in one single cultural expression, but in the myriad and manifold expressions of each human culture into which the gospel is planted. Francis says: "Grace supposes culture, and God's gift becomes flesh in the culture of those who receive it." God's gift becomes flesh. Grace is incarnated. People can see. People can see God.

We proclaim the gospel through the beauty of the word. We proclaim the gospel through the beauty of culture. And we proclaim the gospel by

recognizing the beauty in the other, the beauty in every other. Francis says the church must proclaim the gospel by practicing the "art of accompaniment,"

> *… which teaches us to remove our sandals before the sacred ground of the other.*

The sacred ground of the other … Removing our sandals before the sacred ground of the other … Let that thought sit with you for a while … Let that thought transform what your eyes see, what your ears hear, what your heart feels.

This is how everyone will know the one to whom we belong! By our acknowledgement of the precious value of each other. By our love for each other. By the purity of our hearts.

Remember what Jesus said about those who are pure in heart: they will see God. And, I may add: God will be seen in them. Where love is, God is there. Where charity and love are, God is there.

Ubi caritas et amor, Deus ibi est.