

Discipleship in the Lectionary – 05/15/2022



A look at the week's lectionary through the lens of discipleship and disciple-making.

Fifth Sunday of Easter

Revised Common Lectionary Year C

Sunday, May 15th

John 13:31-35

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A “new” take on a familiar commandment

A familiar commandment is the subject of the Gospel lection for this Fifth Sunday of Easter. This commandment lies at the core of what it means to be a disciple of Jesus and the expression of this commandment is a clear mark of how Jesus' disciples will be identified in any time or place. Pivotal in the interpretation of the text is the meaning of "new" and who Jesus refers to by "one another."

John 13:31-35

Jesus already knows his hour has come. His farewell discourse (chapters 13-17) begins: *Now before the Feast of the Passover, when Jesus knew that his hour had come to depart out of this world to the Father, having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end.* (13:1)

Today's passage follows Jesus washing the feet of His disciples (13:1-17) followed by Jesus identifying Judas as His betrayer (13:18-30):

³¹ When he had gone out, Jesus said, “Now is the Son of Man glorified, and God is glorified in him. ³² If God is glorified in him, God will also glorify him in himself, and glorify him at once. ³³ Little children, yet a little while I am with you. You will seek me, and just as I said to the Jews, so now I also say to you, ‘Where I am going you cannot come.’

Despite being a dark moment (Jesus was troubled in His spirit [13:21]), Jesus does not speak about His betrayal and the consequences of such actions. Instead, Jesus talks of His impending glorification that is connected to His death (parallels to Isaiah 49:3) and He prepares His disciples for what is to come. The tenderness with which Jesus relates to His disciples and the concern He has for them is reflected in the way He addresses them as "*Little Children*." Now follows the familiar commandment:

³⁴ A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another: just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another. ³⁵ By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.”

The expression *Entolēn kainēn didōmi hymin* (a commandment new I give to you) uses the word *kainos* instead of *neos*. In English, both words mean “new” but have variant meanings in Greek. *Neos* means new in time or origin, whereas *kainos* means new in nature or quality. So, this is not a brand new or original commandment but a new form of an existing commandment - an upgrade perhaps?

On all three occasions, the word used for love in vv. 34-35 is the *agapē* form - selfless love, the way in which Christ loves us and we are to love Christ. Jesus is not commanding that His disciples demonstrate mere camaraderie like you would expect to find within a fraternity or sorority but commanding that His disciples demonstrate selfless, sacrificial love for one another. It is no longer sufficient for His disciples to love one another as they would love themselves - this standard is now too low (the equivalent of loving one's neighbor as oneself). Jesus now raises the standard - they are to love one another in the way that Jesus had loved each of them. This includes things like feeding Judas after he was set to betray Jesus (13:26) and His willingness to lay down His life. A parallel commandment is seen in John 15:12-14: *"This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. Greater love has no one than this, that someone lay down his life for his friends. You are my friends if you do what I command you.*

The final verse of the lectionary text (v. 35) is the classic discipleship memory verse: *By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another (13:35).* A key question is who is Jesus referring to by "one another?" The most obvious and most literal interpretation is Jesus is referring to His disciples and the interaction between them, disciple-disciple. An outsider would be able to look at a group of Jesus' disciples and be in awe at how they had love for one another. As a result, others would be drawn to them and would hear about Jesus and the Gospel. There are some who claim "one another" refers to all interactions beyond the disciple-disciple. In other words, through this text Jesus has now augmented the love your neighbor commandment. It is now no longer sufficient to love our neighbor as oneself, but we must love our neighbor as Christ loves us.

Reflections

Today we see many of Christ's disciples living out this commandment in new and innovative ways in a society that is most definitely post-Christendom and where the local church is undergoing much transformation. Missional communities, new worshipping communities, disciple-making groups, non-traditional church plants and house church networks are all such examples. Sadly, many traditional models of discipleship community characteristic of the institutional church era have not always been successful in fulfilling this commandment. Since the Reformation, there has been much division within the church and even much division within denominations. Sadly, many Christians are known today by what separates them from other Christians rather than by the love they have for one another. The world has looked on as so-called disciples of Christ have outdone their worldly counterparts at demonstrating animosity to one another and creating factions within the visible Church. This new commandment from Jesus does not have a doctrinal exclusion clause. Even though there may be genuine disagreements over doctrine that require separation, such does not exclude the reciprocation of *agapē* love.

In the same way, the local church has long been known as a place of entrenched internal conflicts over even the mundane of things. Yet the local church ought to be the place where outsiders can see the love of Christ being reflected among the members. It is only by fulfilling this commandment that the local church will remain relevant.

The final verse, *"By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another" (v.35),* the world is given permission to judge the church and the standard by which to judge it. This standard has remained the same across all eras of the Church, whether Christians were living underground fearing persecution, whether Christianity represented the state religion, or whether the culture was strongly influenced by Christianity. It also includes today when the church is emerging into a post-Christian era further complicated by a post-Pandemic world. Who knows what new expressions of church will look like as buildings that served bygone eras are now closing at an alarming rate? Regardless, such new Christian communities should be recognizable by the love they have for one another.

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