

The Subtext is Love

John 13:12-17; John 13:31-35

There is a Danish author named Karen Blixen who wrote a memoir called *Out of Africa* that recounts the seventeen years, from 1914 to 1931, that she lived as a colonist on a coffee plantation in Kenya. Blixen tells some interesting stories, including one about a boy named Kitau. Kitau came to Blixen one day seeking a job as a domestic servant. She hired him and he worked for her for 3 months. After 3 months, however, Kitau came to Blixen looking for a letter of recommendation; he intended to leave service on Blixen's farm and go work for a Muslim man named Sheik Ali bin Salim. Blixen was surprised and asked Kitau why he wanted to leave and offered to raise his pay in order to convince him to stay on with her. But Kitau wasn't interested in money. He had decided that he wanted to become either a Christian or a Muslim and wanted to get a better idea of the ways and habits of each in a more personal, up close manner. Now that he had worked for Blixen and seen the way of Christians, he would go observe Sheik Ali to study the ways and habits of Muslims. And then he would decide. Blixen shares in the memoir that she wished Kitau had told her all this *before* he came to live with her.

Now, I imagine a great deal of Blixen's feelings around this had to do with the context of the time: she was a Christian, and a colonist, who was prepared to evangelize the people she encountered within her village and the surrounding areas. But I also imagine she wished she knew Kitau's real reason for coming into service in her household because she might have treated Kitau differently. Perhaps she would have made room for intentional conversations with him about Christianity. Maybe she would have given him some special treatment. Anything to better convince Kitau that becoming a Christian was the choice he should make. I would be willing to bet that Kitau got a far more honest picture of Christianity by keeping his intentions secret, however. If Jesus' commandment is to love one another, and if Blixen chose to act out of love as much as possible, did she really have anything to worry about?

The thing is, we want to know when we're being tested. We want the opportunity to put our best foot forward; to impress and make known the best parts of who we are, whether that's individually, or as an organization or business, or even as a country. We want to show the best of who we are and what we represent. We hold an idea in our minds of what the end result of such actions could be, and though we can never know the future, if there's an opportunity to shape it in a way that works for us or for something we stand for, why not take it?

But the thing with real life is that we can't always know when we're being watched, when we're being tested, when we might need to put our best foot forward. We're going to have times when we're tired, frustrated, fearful, uncertain, angry, or ready to put only ourselves first. That's just who we are as humans.

The challenge is to love right through all of that.

In our second scripture reading today we hear Jesus say some very well known words: “I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another” (John 13:34). These words when taken on their own sound... nice. Loving one another is seen as a good thing, and seen as good whether you’re religious or not. Which is why it’s important to consider these words in their literary context. They aren’t words that Jesus just throws out into the world and hopes will have some sticking power. They are said at his last supper with the disciples. Jesus knows that his time on earth is coming to an end and there are very few opportunities left to make sure that the disciples understand what it means to follow him, what it truly means to love. He has tried on multiple occasions to prepare the disciples for his death, and even though the disciples have the rare opportunity of knowing what the future holds—to know what their beloved teacher wants of them as they continue on without him—the disciples still act with fear or in self-serving ways and choose not to accept the outcome that Jesus presents to them. There will be betrayal. There will be denial. There will be departure and desperation, all in the midst of fear and unease. The disciples don’t make themselves easy to love. And yet, Jesus keeps showing them ways to love and never stops loving them.

So what does it mean when Jesus gives this “new” commandment? What makes it new? It’s not as if loving one another is a completely original, never-heard-before concept; in fact, within the book of Leviticus it says not to seek revenge or to hold a grudge against anyone among your people, but to love your neighbour as yourself. And at other times Jesus has spoken about loving God and loving our neighbour as ourselves. Why did Jesus call this a “new” commandment, then?

The “newness” in the commandment is in the instruction of how the disciples are to love one another—it is as Jesus loved them. And Jesus not only tells the disciples how to love each other, but also indicates what will be evidence of that love.

Here we see the impact of Jesus having, just a little earlier on in the meal, taken the time to wash each of the disciples’ feet. Love is found in service to one another, even mundane and menial tasks like washing feet. Or perhaps *especially* in mundane and menial tasks; Jesus shows what it means to serve in a role that is often reserved for servants or for those who are of lesser authority than the one whose feet are being washed. In traditional Jewish custom, Jesus as “Lord and Teacher” would never have been expected to wash the feet of his students; if anything, it would have been the other way around. And so, Jesus provides an example of how to love in a completely unexpected, upside-down way.

This “new commandment” is paralleled a little further on in John’s gospel, too. Jesus says “This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. No one has greater love than this, to lay down one’s life for one’s friends.” (John 15:12-14). This further helps to flesh out what Jesus means by loving one another. On the one hand, it’s about serving each other. On the other hand, it encompasses acts of great risk; in Jesus’ case, it extends even to the point of giving one’s life for another. The love of

which Jesus speaks, then, and which Jesus demonstrates in his life and death, is a love which extends from the mundane to the very risky and encompasses every kind of self-giving act in between. Jesus tells his disciples that it is by this kind of love that everyone will know that they are his disciples.

Back when I was a camp director with the Cairn Family of Camps, we tried out a new programme one spring: a Writer's Retreat. Anyone who needed some time away to really focus on their writing, whatever that looked like, were invited to come stay in their own cabin, eat their meals in our dining hall, write while looking out at a forest or over a lake, and participate in a workshop led by an author, who also happened to be a good friend of mine. In the end we didn't have very many people register for the Retreat, only a handful. And so, at meal times, rather than have participants sit spread out or alone, we encouraged them to join the Cairn staff at one giant table in order to eat in community, all together. This, I think, may have been one of the best parts of the Retreat for our writers. After working in solitude for many hours at a time, the gift of eating and talking with others seemed to be an appreciated reprieve. After one of our meals, my author friend said to me, "I love to hear your staff talk to one another. It doesn't matter what they're talking about, they are all so excited to share their stories and they all listen to each other attentively and with just as much exuberance as the person who is speaking." She then stated, "In everything they say, the subtext is love."

Jesus gives us many examples of how to love throughout the gospels. And on the surface they may appear unsurprising, but the subtext of everything Jesus says and does is always love. Healing isn't done to only make one physically better, but also to bring them closer to spiritual wholeness. Eating meals with others isn't done just because food is required for energy, but as a means to gather in fellowship, service, and sometimes to teach. Feeding a hungry multitude wasn't done to wow people with a miracle and feed them for a day, it was done to give them faith that would help feed them for a lifetime. Associating with those whom conventional society would have frowned upon, changing water to wine to relieve the possible embarrassment of a newly-wed couple, showing compassion to Martha and Mary upon hearing of Lazarus' death; all of these moments, and the many more that the gospels tell, guide us in how we might show love for one another, of how the subtext in every action and every word can and should be *love*.

Of course, listening to stories of how love is expressed is one thing, it can be a very different thing when applied to our own contexts today. How do we love when loving is hard? It's easier to love when we can retract into the safety of our silos where everyone else around us thinks and feels the same things; but how can we love in those spaces and places where there is tension and opposing views? How can we love when we are witness to people and communities that choose to ignore rather than learn? What can motivate us to serve, to enact love, to make it the subtext of every self-giving act, particularly when justice seems futile?

The truth is, there is no easy answer. We see this with Jesus' own disciples as they betray and deny and hide in fear. But here is the nature of Christian love: it is a love

aware of consequences. It is a love aware of challenges. It is a love aware of sacrifice. Most of all, it is a love that loves anyway. A love that knows what it is getting itself into, and yet loves abundantly. Otherwise, our love merely skims the surface of God's love. And if it merely skims the surface, then it will be satisfied with the love of the world, a love that demands and decrees, a love that stipulates and insists on certain standards, a love that has convinced itself of a self-maintaining love, a self-preserving love, a self-love. A love unwilling to take risks. A scared love. A safe love. And that kind of love is not the kind that Jesus calls us to embrace.

“Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another,” Jesus says. We could leave off that last clause, making it easier. But Jesus does not let us off the hook. The demand to have love for one another surrounds Jesus' love for us. Yes, truly, Jesus loves us. God loves the world. But as soon as we assume that this love is one-directional, Jesus corrects us. His love means love for him *and* love for the other. This love is not just between you and Jesus. This love is for the sake of the world.

Today we have another baptism within our church. Shael will be brought into the family of God and into the family of Armour Heights. As an almost-three-year-old, his journey in faith is only just beginning. But one of the blessings of baptism is the moment when we all, as members of God's family, stand and promise to help raise Shael in love. Our challenge is to show how that love is the love that Jesus commanded: a love that doesn't merely skim the surface, but embraces the hard parts—the sacrifice, the hurting hearts, the challenges; the elements that make love real and the knowledge that what's on the other side of all those difficult parts is what's most fulfilling, most Christ-like.

We disciples of Jesus have continually fallen short in our love for one another both within and outside of our faith community. We've been witness to arguments that descend into personal attacks and name-calling. We've been witness to personal interests that have been used to trump the common good of the community. We've been witness to those in need of compassion finding judgment instead.

But Jesus could not be clearer: it is not by our theological correctness, not by our moral purity, not by our impressive knowledge that everyone will know that we are his disciples. It is quite simply by our loving acts—acts of service and sacrifice, acts that are both mundane and risky, acts that point to the love of God for the world made known in Jesus Christ. May the subtext in all we do be love.