

REFLECTION August 3 - How God Changes Our Thinking
Inspired by John 13:1-35 and Revelation 21: 1-6

Have you ever thought about what is going on in the world today in terms of Peter's experience? Have you ever wondered why so many are afraid of immigrants, legal or not? Do we realize that Sunday morning can be the most exclusive, segregated, and separate time of the week? All week long we work with, bump against, commute with, and eat with people who are not like us, but often on Sunday we attend a church that consists mostly of people like ourselves.

There are exceptions, of course. But many of our churches do not look anything like the communities that we live in, the grocery stores we shop in, or the movie theaters we attend. Why is that? Do you ever wonder?

We all get into mental ruts and often need a whack on the side of the head to jar us into new and better ways of thinking. We also bring a lot of wrong-thinking baggage with us into our Christian life. If we are truly going to live by our Vision and Calling, then maybe every once in a while, God has to take a 2x4 and gently whack us on the side of the head to help us change our thinking.

The writer of Revelation, our second reading for today, offers a passage often read at funerals. The image of death having been vanquished, of mourning and crying being no more, and of God wiping away every tear is a powerful image, followed by the declaration that God is making all things new. One of those new things is surely the way we experience one another as diverse gifts of the God, who made us all. If we begin to change our way of thinking about people who are different from us in race or culture, then we will see them as God's gifts to us. That gives us a whole different point of view toward the many people God brings into our lives. Sure, we can turn away from them, but does that not mean we are turning away from God?

When we hear the gospel reading, Jesus' own words call us to love one another, "Just as I have loved you." This is not a phrase easily dismissed. Jesus' entire ministry, including his passion and resurrection, hangs on this sentence. Jesus loved people in a radical way. Today he would be – and often is – in the supermarket talking with the cashiers, the stockers, and the customers finding their way through a bewildering array of products. He is there because that is where all of us go to buy food. He is there because that may be where a lonely newcomer to town gets a smile at the cash register, or even a query, "Are you new here? Welcome."

So, what about church? What about that Sunday morning experience that is often the place where we see only familiar faces, only people like us, only people we know? Is Jesus here? Are we following his teachings? We say we are welcoming – but if someone sits in our pew!

Our culture impresses upon us the idea that love is primarily a feeling that happens to us. Today's reading, however, demonstrates that love is primarily about action rather than feeling.

Don't mistake what I'm saying — our emotions are vital and important parts of who we are. I am simply saying that love, from the Biblical perspective, is rooted in action.

Let's take a look at the scene from John's reading. Jesus and his disciples have returned to Jerusalem, where Jesus' enemies are on the lookout for him. Jesus and his disciples are

celebrating the Passover meal in private. Imagine — the disciples are full of exuberance, eagerly awaiting the reward that will come when Jesus establishes the kin-dom of God. But Jesus knows what is coming. So, in these last hours before the soldiers come to take him away, Jesus gives his disciples a vivid example of the kind of life to which they are called. Jesus gives them and us an example of living a life of love.

God changes our thinking with his action and teaching

The first thing he shows us is that love is about action. This was way before paved roads. Dirt streets were dusty and dry, and most people walked, so feet got dirty. Ordinarily, it was the duty of the host to have a servant ready to wash the feet of guests so they might enjoy their meal in comfort. Since no servant was available, it logically would have fallen to one of the disciples to wash the feet of the others.

But the disciples had just been arguing over who would be greatest in the kin-dom. So clearly these “great princes in the kin-dom” were too proud to perform the menial task of washing one another’s feet. Imagine for a moment the confusion among them as the Master — the last one who should be doing this — stands, puts on servant’s clothing, and carries a basin and begins washing feet. Here Jesus teaches us that love is an action of service and humility. Jesus meets a need where others are too proud to act.

God changes our thinking by repeating the lesson until it sinks in

In case his disciples miss the point, Jesus keeps coming back to it. Verses 13-17 show how Jesus instructs his disciples to follow his example by washing one another’s feet. Again, down in verse 34-35, Jesus says to love one another. Jesus’ command here is to actively express our love to one another. In today’s world, this applies to how we love and care for one another not only within the church but within our community.

As we think about love as action rather than love as feeling, I believe the most accessible summary of Scripture’s teaching on this is in Dr. Gary Chapman’s book *The Five Love Languages*. His idea is that there are 5 main ways we, as humans, actively express love:

1. Touch,
2. Words of affirmation,
3. Quality time,
4. Gifts, and 5. Acts of service.

These are the primary types of actions that we can take to show our love. Most of us will tend to focus in one of these love languages — it becomes our primary way of expressing and understanding love. If we do not receive love back in that language, then we might feel unloved. Our challenge, as Christians, is that we should all work on becoming masters of communicating love to everyone we encounter.

Let’s look at how we can express our love through touch: when we know someone needs a hug, handshake, or comforting arms around the shoulders — Let’s give it to them. Then we have words of affirmation. Why not send a wee note of encouragement or thank you card or give a spontaneous compliment when it is least expected. David was notorious when it came to thank you cards. But sometimes just listening can speak louder than words. What about quality time?

It could simply be staying in touch with shut-ins, experiencing a cultural event with someone, or creating opportunities to meet for coffee with friends. I meet with my French Connection every Wednesday – Then the good old gifts. It doesn't necessarily mean spending money; it could be simply sharing your skills and knowledge.

Finally, acts of service: These could be acts of kindness like opening doors, saying hello or smiling at strangers which might lift someone up and even change the trajectory of their life.

I've been reading Cicely Tyson's autobiography, and I liked what she wrote: "When you give yourself away, when you surrender yourself as a divine vessel, you impact lives eternally."

The end picture is if we put more energy in showing our love actions for one another then our blessings will overflow and affect the those who witness them. There's a reason why Jesus says, "By this all men will know you are my disciples." If we love one another, the whole world will see and know the meaning of love in action.

God changes our thinking by jarring us through uncomfortable feelings

After showing that love is action, Jesus also demonstrates that love is receiving. Looking at the passage, as Peter figures out what Jesus is doing, Peter tells Jesus to stop. Look how Jesus replies: "Unless I wash you, you have no part with me." This is probably the hardest part of the passage — it's easy for most of us to share our love with other people, but boy, it's the hardest thing to be the recipient? It takes humility to serve someone else; it takes even more humility to admit that we need help. Most of us like to think that we are the Master of our lives — that we have everything under control — that we are independent and can make it on our own. There's an unspoken sense of shame with admitting that we need someone else. But as Jesus points out here, if we try to stand on our own, we have no part of him.

We cannot stand on our own, we must rely upon each other! Each of us must learn to depend on the people sitting next to us and across from us. Learning that kind of humility is hard.

God changes our thinking by seeing that He is the Mastermind — not us!

Love may be "action", love may be "receiving" but love also extends to the unlovable.

Note that after Jesus performs this expression of love, he reveals that one of his followers will betray him, and he tells Peter to his face that Peter will deny him. He knows that Judas is a traitor, and he still shows love toward him. He knows that Peter will deny him, and he still shows love toward him. This is consistent with what Jesus taught in the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 5:43-44: "Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you."

If Christ was filled with enough love to wash the feet of a traitor and a coward, then how much more should we express love to those who are unlovable to us? How much more should we love that irritating person who gets on our very last nerve? I have some of those. How much more should we love that person who talks incessantly without giving us a chance to reply. I have some of those too. How much more should we love that person whose pettiness astounds us to no end? Yip got those! How much more should we love our brothers and sisters when they are childish, thoughtless, selfish, mean, and just plain rude? I know it's hard. It's impossible. We can't do it without God working within us.

We couldn't do it if we didn't know that God loved them first. We couldn't do it if we didn't know that God loved us even when we're unlovable.

Yes, God often has to whack us to get us to change. If we're comfortable, we don't feel any need to change. But if we're suddenly hit with a new situation that's outside our comfort zone, we realize that our old ways of thinking won't do. We have to listen to God and trust Him to do something we can't do on our own.

So, let's try it. Intentionally act out love — let's look for opportunities that are blessings. Let's have the humility to receive blessings from others and graciously say "thank you".

Finally, let's have the tenacity to love the unlovable. And when we have a hard time doing these things — let's talk to God. He knows we can't do it alone, so he'll help us discover what's so great about love. Let's think about that. Amen. Thank you for listening.