

Sermon ☩ May 15, 2022

John 13:31-35

Frank Maxwell

She reached for my hand with difficulty as I stood by her bed. Her face was contorted into a smile. I had called on her many times as I made my rounds as a student chaplain at Unity Hospital in Fridley, Minnesota. Mary was forty-five and suffered from advance stages of multiple sclerosis. Every movement she made was a studied effort. Every word she spoke was an agonizing struggle. By now it was evident that this insidious disease had taken its toll on her frail body. Yet she smiled.

Mary was a woman of great faith. On this day she told me in a simple and beautiful way what Christ meant to her. It took many minutes because speech was difficult. Then, still holding my hand and with a smile on her face, she said: *"I know I am a Christian. Tell me, do you know why you are a Christian?"*

It was a question that caught me off guard. At first, I was angry. How dare she ask me, the student chaplain, such a question. I don't remember what a young theological student gave as an answer that day, but I'm sure it stunk.

And I am certain Mary's question was one of the most important questions I would ever be asked. It was a good question in 1972 and it is a valid question today. How are Christians known? It would do us well to take a closer look at something we may all take for granted.

How are Christians known? In the past, it is a question that would have been answered rather quickly. *"They will know we are Christians by the way we dress."* Not all that long ago, a Roman Catholic nun could be readily identified by her habit, a priest by his clerical garb, and even a protestant minister by his black suit and tie. The Amish, and similar groups, can still be identified in a crowd by their particular style of dress.

Others would answer, *"They can tell we are Christians by what we say."*

A Christian can be identified by what he or she professes and the way in which that belief is expressed. We quite often pin the label *Christian* on the person who seems to be able to use just the right words . . . words like: God, Jesus, saved, born-again, and redeemed in the proper sequence. Pious speech has often been the measure of a person's faith.

Still others would say, *"They can tell we are Christian by the way we act."*

But quite often the standards of conduct have a way of becoming rules of behavior of what a Christian would not do rather than what the Christian person should do.

The 19th century English philosopher, John Stuart Mill wrote: *"Christian morality has all the characteristics of a reaction. Its' ideal is negative rather than positive. Rather than the energetic pursuit of good, in its precepts, 'thou shall not' predominates unduly over 'thou shalt.'"*

So, how are Christians known? It is true that you can tell a lot about a person by the way one dresses, or talks, or acts . . . but our question still begs an answer.

What does the Bible say? What did Jesus say? The 35th verse of the 13th chapter of John's gospel gives us a clue: *"If you love each other, everyone will know that you are my disciples."*

These are the words spoken by Jesus to his disciples. He knew at this point that he was not going to be with them much longer. The cross had begun to take shape. Soon he would die, and they would be cut loose to fend for themselves.

He did not want them to forget who they were. Their lives contained a certain quality that would let them know, and all whom they touched, that they were Christian. What was it?

It wasn't their dress or pious speech. As a matter of fact, they looked like everyone else. You will know you are Christian, said Jesus, by one thing and one thing only love.

Now I know how you must feel when the preacher begins to talk about love. *"Please, Frank, I've heard this before!"*

It turns some off immediately and others are discouraged because it is an ideal they can never seem to reach. British author and philosopher, Aldous Huxley made a great comment about love: *"Of all the worn, smudged, dog-eared words in our vocabulary, 'love' is surely the grubbiest, smelliest, slimiest. Bawled from a million pulpits, lasciviously crooned through hundreds of millions of loud speakers, it has become an outrage to good taste and decent feeling, an obscenity which one hates to pronounce. And, yet, it has to be pronounced, for after all, love is the last word."*

Love . . .

If you have it, you don't need much else.

If you don't have it, what ever else you might possess is of little worth.

But *to love* is probably the most difficult assignment of life. This is where our Christian faith takes on size and proportion: We become known by our love.

It is love that has kept the church alive for centuries . . . not great innovative programming, professional sounding choirs, or fantastic preaching. Just love. What a blow to our egos.

So what of the church and this thing called love? To begin with we need to realize that most of us, a great deal of the time, are not very lovable creatures. But to the extent that we try to love, that we try to do our best, to that extent we are practicing Christians.

It's kind of like the young child who came home from school to tell her mother of a playmate who had been unfairly scolded by the teacher. *"And I helped him,"* the little girl exclaimed. *"What did you do?"* her mother asked. *"Well, I couldn't do much, but I helped him cry."*

Oftentimes we can't do much, but if we are serious about this matter of loving, we will not be satisfied with doing nothing. Sometimes we can do nothing else but share in another's tears. And, they will know we are Christians by our love.

Jesus not only commissioned his disciples to love but he also reminded them in the same sentence that they were loved. How well we are able to practice love does not depend on the loveliness or the unloveliness of the person needing our love. It depends more on our memory of Christ. In being loved, we learn how to love.

Something begins to happen when we fall in love with Christ. It draws out of us, out of the very depths of our being, qualities which never before were apparent. We become new persons.

We love, says St. John, because he first loved us. No one can teach another how to love. Really, this isn't even the church's business.

All the church can do is to put us in touch with Christ and remind us in every conceivable way of his love for us. And what follows is the miracle no one can understand but which causes us one day to say with humility and compassion, "*Jesus loves me, this I know, for the Bible tells me so.*"