

## May 10, 2015 Sunday School Lesson

### John 13: 31-35

#### Commentary on the Text:

John 13:31-35 marks the beginning of what is commonly known as “The Farewell Discourse.” Following a long tradition of leaders making speeches at the close of their ministry, Jesus prepares his disciples for the things that are about to come. Throughout John 13–17, Jesus shows in actions and in speech those things he finds most important to convey to the disciples. Discipleship, loving one another, friendship and Christ’s departure come in and out of focus — and in and out of relationship to the other terms. Although Christ is departing, through the disciples’ love for Christ he will be manifest to them (14:21). Their love is shown by their keeping his commandment (14:15, 21). Likewise, their true status as friends is dependent on their doing what he commands (15:14). But they have been chosen and appointed to bear fruit and to abide in Christ (15:16).

John 13:31-35 specifically highlights Christ’s departure and his command to love one another. However, verse 31 begins with “When he had gone out.” This naturally leaves one to wonder “when *who* had gone out?” The answer we find is Judas: When *Judas* had gone out. Directly antecedent to our passage is the scene where Jesus announced that one of his disciples would betray him. After a worried query from the beloved disciple, Jesus identifies Judas as the betrayer with a dipped piece of bread. Satan enters Judas, and Judas departs. But likewise, directly *after* our passage, Peter boldly declares that he will lay down his life for Christ, only to be rebuffed and informed of his own impending denial. The passage is framed by the failures of two of Jesus’ 12 disciples. And it is within this setting of betrayal on one end and denial on the other that Jesus gives his command to love. “Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another” (v. 34).

Jesus prefaces this commandment to love with an announcement of his glorification and departure. These are set together to help interpret each other: Jesus’ glorification is coming in the sacrifice he is about to make, and his departure is part of his glorification. God and the Son of Man’s glory are directly linked: It is through Christ’s glorifying God that Christ’s own reciprocal glory will come. And what has been the signal of Christ’s glorification? It is, in fact, the departure of Judas that acts as the marker into this stage of glorification: “*Now the Son of Man has been glorified*” (italics added).

Linked with this stage of glorification is Jesus’ departure: “Little children, I am with you only a little longer” (v. 33). Jesus prepares his disciples for the separation that is about to happen. He explains that though they seek him, they will not be able to come with him. This naturally would cause the disciples unease and sorrow. And later, Jesus will comfort the disciples with the promise of dwellings in his Father’s house, and with the promise of the Helper, the Spirit of truth. Yet before this, Jesus pairs his announcement of his departure and glorification with the command to love one another. In the context, we can assume that the commandment is meant to comfort the disciples; despite the loss of their Lord, they will have Christ’s love extended by each other. Yet Christ goes on to give another reason for his command: “By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another” (v. 35). It isn’t merely as a source of comfort that they are to love one another. Jesus’ command to love one another is to be a witness to others, to *all* people. It is a marker of a disciple of Christ, that they love each other.

John 15:12-17 is an interesting parallel to 13:31-35 and helps serve to interpret it. Jesus

begins with the same injunction: "love one another as I have loved you" (15:12). This time Jesus continues with the poignant words "No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends" (15:13). Once again, Jesus is alluding to his death. Once again, Jesus is holding himself up as the model of what love and friendship are. And he calls his disciples "friends" at first on the condition that they do what he commands (15:14). Yet directly after, he declares that they are indeed friends, and that they were chosen that they might bear fruit — and abiding fruit at that (15:16). While their status as friends is contingent on doing what Christ commands — that is, love one another — they're also given an assurance that they will be able to do that which he commands.

This helps interpret the framing of 13:31-35 by an announcement of Judas' betrayal on the one side and Peter's denial on the other. The framing works both symmetrically and asymmetrically. On the one hand, the strength of Christ's words is highlighted amid the symmetrical circumstances of his followers' unfaithfulness. Christ's glory and unfailing love are all the more apparent compared to the shame of Peter and the hatred of Judas. Yet there is asymmetry, too; for although Judas departs, never to return, Peter, after denying Christ, returns to lead faithfully. Christ's assurances in John 15 that his own will abide prove true in Peter. First John 3, picking up this theme, states it this way: "By this we know love, that he laid down his life for us, and we ought to lay down our lives for the brothers. ... By this we shall know that we are of the truth and reassure our heart before him; for whenever our heart condemns us, God is greater than our heart, and he knows everything" (3:16, 19-20, ESV). Consistently throughout Scripture, there is an injunction to love, to love to the death. This is a command that is to be followed. And yet, just as consistently, there is a witness of failure — and of God's mercy even so.

### **Lesson to Consider:**

#### **Love is less what you feel than what you do.**

Years ago, a USA Today, article prescribed an interesting course of treatment for medical professionals. In order to make patients feel better about their doctors and doctors feel better about their patients, some analysts are suggesting acting lessons.

As accomplished actors, physicians who find themselves too swamped, stressed-out and suspicious to really feel any compassion for their patients can at least act like they care. The ultimate goal of these acting lessons is the hope that by teaching doctors to respond as if they are emotionally connected to their patients, these doctors may come to genuinely feel the compassion and care they have been acting out. The USA Today study did keep its feet planted firmly on the ground of reality, however. It admitted that surgeons were a lost cause.

Actually, this suggestion is not as silly as it seems. After constantly dealing with needy, hurting people, all members of the "helping professions" tend to build up a protective layer that helps them distance themselves from their patients or clients or parishioners. Sometimes we are so drained, so dragged-out, that the best we can do is mechanically go through the paces. It is at that point we've got to start acting.

When people who have just performed some heroic, life-threatening deed in order to save another are asked how they "felt" about what they were doing while they were doing it, the reply is usually "nothing." Here's a stranger who helped pull three children out of a burning house: "I didn't even think about it. It was happening so fast, and I knew we just had to get them out of there." Here's the mother who lifts a tree off her son's leg: "I didn't even feel

how heavy it was -- until I put it down." When love and compassion for another take over completely, it is expressed through actions, not feelings. You cannot gradually and cautiously feel your way toward a loving action. Love is action. Genuine love always leaps before it looks.

This is exactly the kind of love we celebrate today on Mother's Day. Love in action is the force behind all those meals Mom prepared; all those chauffeured trips to soccer, baseball, ballet and piano lessons; all those good-night books read to sleepy children by a sleepier mom; all those long walks and long talks -- and all those other things that were done by a Super Mom who juggled both a career and an active, energetic home life.

We even reflect a tiny bit of that action-packed love back to our mothers on this day -- although whether this is a measure of how well they instilled a sense of love or a sense of guilt in each of us may be a good question. Mother's Day is the second-busiest day of the year for telephone companies (only Christmas Day tops it). It is also the second-busiest day of the year for florists (again after Christmas, but before Valentine's Day). It is the fourth-biggest day among greeting card companies. Few of us carefully budget some extra money for a long phone call and a bunch of flowers for Mom -- we just do it. The consequences (the bills) will come later. Today, we just want to show how much we care by doing something.

Jesus' new commandment to his disciples was precisely this: Show your love. Love one another. By your love, they will know more about you than by anything else you could do. Love each other as I have loved you. Jesus didn't love us by simply feeling loving toward us. Jesus lived a life that embodied love. He healed the sick. He fed the hungry. He comforted the confused. He taught the ignorant. He hugged the little children. Jesus' love was so great that he went to the cross, suffered torture and death as his greatest demonstration of action-packed love. The love Jesus wants his disciples to enter into -- not just to "feel" -- is action-packed. And love in action is sometimes embodied by the simplest of compassionate responses.

This true story of a Presbyterian miracle, found on an Ecunet Bulletin Board, tells of a pastor coming back to church one Sunday after the death of his wife.

He came to the early service to change the pattern he and Nancy had established of attending at 11. He thought there'd be people there he knew, to sit with, but he misjudged and came 15 minutes early, the way preachers will. He sat alone in the center of a pew, two empty pews behind him and three in front, a brave, sad, solitary man.

But then "the miracle" happened. "Bob and Nita Garrett slid out of their pew, six rows behind, and quietly moved down the aisle to slip in beside him. Two Presbyterians had left their pew to move down closer to the front."

A true "Presbyterian miracle" had taken place (Thanks to Houston Hodges).

Jesus urged his disciples to have love for one another so that "everyone will know that you are my disciples." The ability to love all -- even the most unlovable of sorts, has always been the test of this discipleship-love. After the crowds had stoned him, mocked him, spit upon him, screamed "crucify him," Jesus could still cry out in love, "Forgive them, they know not what they do." How can we hope to imitate this love in our own lives? How can we prove ourselves disciples of this love? [Here you might cut from your own context examples of action-packed love.]

Sister Ann Manganaro, a physician and poet who lived, loved and died as a Sister of Loretto, worked in Guarjila, El Salvador, with the poor and needy. She died of cancer in 1993. She was only in her mid-40s. John F. Kavanaugh, who was with Sister Ann when she died, tells this story from her life.

Once, while working in a neonatal intensive care unit, she struggled hard to save a five-inch premature baby named Tamika. "The girl was left in the hospital, fated to die, unable to thrive, bereft of possibility. She smiled once, cupped in Ann's hands, after weeks of being held, caressed and gazed upon. Then she died.

"After we two buried Tamika with the help of a generous funeral director, I protested to Ann that it all felt so meaningless and bleak. 'What on earth did Tamika ever have?' 'Well,' Ann said, 'she had the power to evoke love from me.'" (As cited in John Kavanaugh, "Imperceptible Life, Incomprehensible Death," *America*, 4-11 June 1994, 31.)

An action-packed faith is the power of love in action, is the power of Christ incarnate in each one of our lives.