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John 13:31-35

Freedom to Love

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John 13:31-35 New Revised Standard Version

When he had gone out, Jesus said, “Now the Son of Man has been glorified, and God has been glorified in him. If God has been glorified in him, God will also glorify him in himself and will glorify him at once. Little children, I am with you only a little longer. You will look for me; and as I said to the Jews so now I say to you, ‘Where I am going, you cannot come.’ I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.”

Today we are celebrating the Festival of God’s creation so I wanted to begin by asking what Obi Wan Kenobi said to the tree? May the Forest be with you. Or what about this one? Why did the leaf go to the doctor? It was feeling green! How can you tell the ocean is friendly? It waves. As we celebrate Earth Day and we give God thanks for the gift of this world, I am reminded of the story in our scripture.

Our scripture today is a story about fear. Jesus teaches us all what to do in the face of fear. For three years the disciples have been with Jesus. Jesus has taught them and challenged them. He has come to be someone they know they can trust. But by the time of the scripture that we read today, fear is all around the disciples. The religious authorities and the Roman occupiers had begun making plans to kill the young revolutionary leader named Jesus. And then Jesus named out loud what they had all been thinking about. One of them would betray him and when that one left the room, Jesus said to those who were left, “Where I am going, you cannot come.” The disciples were afraid because the one whom they had thought they could trust was leaving them. Of course their most likely response would be to protect themselves, to grow quiet and to turn inward, that is, to act the way people act when they are afraid.

Jesus knows the human condition so he shares with them his most important teaching. To face their fear Jesus gives them a new commandment, to love one another. Being a follower of Jesus means to love one another. There is no better response to fear than love. That is what sets us apart as Christians. We do not act out of our fear; we act out of our love for one another. Loving one another changes us. Karen Armstrong wrote in the *Spiritual Staircase*, religion is not about having to believe or accept certain difficult propositions, religion is “about doing things that change you” (p. 270).

“Love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another.” So, if love is how people know that we are a Christian, how are we doing? What does it mean to love one another in our homes and in our jobs, in our neighborhoods and in our city? I went to a lunch this week about the Zip Code Connection, which is an initiative of the North Texas Conference of the United Methodist Church, launched in 2013 to eradicate poverty in two zip codes in 75215 in South Dallas/Fair Park and 75426 in Red River County, by 2025. Eradicating poverty is not just about income or eradicating poverty would just be about getting everyone more money. Poverty is a complicated set of interdependent variables that must be addressed simultaneously.

Communities that have been in poverty for multiple generations frequently have absent or broken infrastructure that is necessary to support hope and healthy connections to God, to neighbors, and to resources for all community members[[1]](#footnote-2). The goal is that these two communities, South Dallas/Fair Park and Red River County, are recognized as good places to live, work, learn, do business, raise children, and worship. Community members will have connections to God, to neighbors, and to the resources they need.

Relationships are being built as we learn together with our neighbors. Just as I have loved you, Jesus says, you also should love one another. God’s love frees us to love another. When we are down, we are able to find encouragement from one another. When we are facing a challenge or having a hard time, we are able to find support and love in one another. Loving one another is about spending quality time with others. When we spend quality time with one another, with phones away and all of our attention devoted to the other person, we are able to build relationships.

We find hope when we realize that we can live in harmony with our neighbors and with creation. Hope is found when we commit ourselves to justice for all who call our planet home. Jesus said, “By this everyone will know you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.”

Amen.

1. http://www.zipcodeconnection.org [↑](#footnote-ref-2)