

5th Sunday of Easter ~ May 6, 2007

Love One Another by Rev. Susan Morrison

John 13: 31 – 35

When Judas had gone out, Jesus said, “Now is the Chosen One glorified, and God is glorified as well. ³²If God has been glorified, God will also glorify the Chosen One and will glorify him at once. ³³Little children, I am with you only a little longer. You will look for me; and as I said to the Temple authorities so now I say to you, ‘Where I am going, you cannot come.’ ³⁴I give you a new commandment. Love one another. And you’re to love one another the way I have loved you. ³⁵By this everyone will know that you are my disciples: that you truly love one another.”

Who among us has refinished a piece of furniture? Perhaps you’ve stripped off old varnish or old paint? A chair or a table or an old washstand or a buffet becomes like a new piece of furniture? Or who among us has reupholstered a chair or a sofa? Maybe new springs were needed before the fresh, clean fabric was attached to make the furniture look new?

Jesus gives his disciples a “new” commandment in this morning’s gospel lesson. “I give you a new commandment” he says. “Love one another.” But like the refinished piece of furniture or the reupholstered chair, his commandment is really old and yet he makes it like new. Let me explain.

The Hebrew scriptures that Jesus’ grew up with were filled with mandates to love one another. Likewise, the commandment to love one another would not have sounded new to Jesus’ disciples. They knew the Torah and could turn to Leviticus 19:18 and read the word of God, stating very plainly, “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” Love was a basic Jewish teaching.

So why does Jesus call this a “new” commandment? It’s new because no one has ever loved the way Jesus loved. No one has ever loved so selflessly, so completely that their very life is given for us. Think of what Jesus was saying to his disciples. In the words of Elizabeth Barrett Browning, Jesus’ might as well have asked “How do I love you? Let me count the ways.” I called you, taught you, and blessed you. I invited you to be part of everything I have done. You were with me when I gave sight to the blind man and when Lazarus walked out of the tomb. I was with you when you were scared out of your minds during that storm at sea. I cared for you as a shepherd cares for sheep. I washed your feet. I fed you with bread and wine. And now I ask you to love others as I have loved you. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples.” (*Lectioary Homiletics*, May 2007, p. 55)

Such a demanding commandment spoken with such great tenderness. This is a love that goes way beyond ordinary neighborliness. It’s more than doing a good deed now and then. It doesn’t have much to do with simple affection. This kind of love is bold, uncompromising, risk-taking, life-demanding, extravagantly generous. It’s a love that is willing to spend itself for the sake of another. It is an action verb. And this is the kind of love that will forever be the distinguishing mark of followers of Jesus Christ.

This morning I want to ask you to measure our proposed vision, mission statement and goals against this new commandment that Jesus has given us. *Everyone in ministry ~ united in God’s love*. That’s the vision. It’s a call for everyone to be an active participant in the life and mission and ministries of this congregation. It dares to imagine everyone engaged in acts of love. And it claims that this is possible only if we are *united in God’s love*. It doesn’t mean sameness. It means that we are diverse, different people but we are united in our love for God and God’s love for us. How do you feel about this vision? Does it challenge you? excite you? embolden you to renew or make a new commitment to the way Holy Trinity lives out its love for God, neighbor and self?

The recommended goals invite us into active ministries of love. Many of you, in *Have Your Say* gatherings last winter, named your concern about the lack of young adults at Holy Trinity. It’s clear that what appeals to many of us does not attract the millennial and survivor generations to church. What kind of worship experience and study

group would nurture their spiritual lives and bring them into a closer relationship with Jesus so that they, too, would want to love others as Jesus' has loved them? This is the question that the first goal asks of us. It will take time to figure out the answer and then act on it... but we have time!

Let's continue our hospitality efforts invites the second goal. And when newcomers join us let's find ways to make them a part of our life together. If everyone is going to be in ministry, then people need to be invited to find a niche, to use their talents and spiritual gifts here at Holy Trinity.

Town officials and your own interests and concerns helped the Visioning Task Force outline goals 3 and 4. Youth and Senior Citizens are in need of services. How can we extend Christ's love to at risk youth and to older members of our local community? Do you have a vested interest in either of these goals? Jesus would say that it is by getting involved, by loving others as he has loved us, that people will know that we are his disciples.

If we are to be truly united in God's love, then we can work together to create the Relational Covenant that goal 5 calls for. Children and teens in our Sunday School and youth groups, Church Council members, Church committees, UMW circles, and members of the congregation will be asked to contribute to this covenant that will guide us in the way that we treat one another. Many of you shared your concerns about the negative effects of gossip or the way that criticism is given or the hurt that is caused by the way people treat one another at Holy Trinity. This goal addresses those concerns. How good it will be to agree on what is acceptable and what is not acceptable behavior. It's important to note that this goal does not squelch criticism or conflict. Criticism and conflict are healthy attributes in the life of a church. What it does ask is that we agree on how to give criticism and suggestions and how to settle conflicts in a way that reflects love for one another. United in God's love we will all be in ministry together.

Finally, the 6th goal calls for the organizing of a Capital Campaign Committee to help us meet some of our financial obligations. As part of the United Methodist connectional system, we contribute, along with every other church in the New England Conference to the ongoing expenses of the denomination. Recently, this included a conference wide capital campaign to which we were asked to pledge \$53,000. over the next 5 years. Simultaneously, the trustees at Holy Trinity are aware of several capital improvements that are needed to maintain the quality of our building. And finally, as a United Methodist congregation, you are responsible for housing your pastor. Although your last 3 pastors have had their own housing, this is very, very rare among clergy. Addressing the question of how to adequately fund your pastors housing is necessary and the Capital Campaign Committee will be asked to suggest the best way possible.

These six goals are intended to give direction to our life together over the next 5 years. Some will be acted upon immediately. Others will take time and not come to fruition for another few years. It is the hope of the Visioning Task Force that they will become integrated into the strong mission and ministries that are already in place. Scripture tells us that without a vision, the people perish. I believe that. And I believe these goals will encourage us to become our vision of *Everyone in Ministry ~ United by God's love.*

Last week in Disciple Bible Study we read of an old legend that tells of people wanting to buy the fruits of the Spirit. These fruits, which are in those who live in Christ's Spirit, are love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control (Gal.5: 22 -23). But the people who wanted to buy these fruits of the Spirit were told, "We don't sell the fruit; we sell the seeds."

That's what these goals are. They are the seeds and when we plant them they will become amazing fruit of love in action. And by that love, everyone will know that we here at Holy Trinity are Jesus' disciples.

Will you join me once more in reading the proposed Mission Statement? Everything we do will be tested and measured against this Mission Statement. It becomes our plumbline for all of our work and future decisions. See if it captures for you our mission and purpose as a congregation. Does it embrace Jesus' new commandment that we are to love one another as he has loved us?

We are an inclusive and reconciling Christian congregation, growing in our discipleship with Jesus Christ. We aspire to love God, our neighbors, and ourselves. We welcome all people to participate in the life and

ministries of this church. We care for and support one another. We reach out to our brothers and sisters near and far.

On May 20th at 11 o'clock, you will be encouraged to pull up a chair in the Fellowship Hall and vote on this recommended report from the Visioning Task Force. Their hope is that everyone will own the proposed vision, mission and goals. Even if you don't agree with every detail in the report, hopefully you will be able to align yourself with its overall intentions.

Today after worship there will be a Have Your Say group for anyone who has questions or needs something in the report to be clarified. Please take a few moments and share your thoughts with members of the Visioning Task Force. Your thoughts, your voice, your questions matter! Your input made a difference in the writing of the report. Your input will continue to make a difference as we anticipate our All Church Conference on May 20th.

May God bless our church and may we yearn to love one another as Christ has loved each one of us. Thanks be to God. Alleluia. Amen.