

Love Who?

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John 13:33-35 — “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.”

Jesus knew that this was the end. When he sat down to share a sacred meal with his disciples, he knew that he would not get to sit down with them again. Throughout his unconventional ministry, there had always been controversy: Jesus did things that blatantly violated religious traditions, and he said things that seemed to undermine the political authorities. Fearing that controversy would become chaos, Rome said, “Enough.” And the religious elites at Jerusalem’s temple applauded and colluded with the empire. Within a matter of hours after speaking these words in John 13, Jesus would be arrested, tried, tortured, and executed.

What does Jesus share with his disciples in these final hours, after this final meal together? What is his parting message, the thing that he most wants them to remember, most wants them to do? “I am giving you a new commandment,” he says, “that you love one another.” Now, I’m guessing that at least a few of you are thinking, “Hold up. Is this really a *new* commandment? Has Jesus not yet told his followers that they should love each other?” Apparently not—at least, not explicitly. He’s told them to love their enemies. He’s told them to love their neighbor—and then told them a parable to teach them that anyone who needs help is their neighbor. But it seems that Jesus is now telling them, for the first time, “Love each other. Love the people around this table. Don’t just love all of the people ‘out there’; love the people within your own fellowship of faith.”

Did this really need to be said? I mean, given all of Jesus’s other words about loving people, did he really need to specify, here at the very end of his life, that his disciples should love one another? Looking back on my childhood, I get it. My two sisters and I were very well-behaved children...at least we were in public. My parents hammered into us the importance, even the necessity of being respectful, polite, friendly, all that jazz—and we were...again, at least in public. At home, it was a different story. We were often at each other’s throats, arguing, name-calling. Sometimes, we were just unpleasant; other times, we were pretty nasty. Growing up, I remember my mom saying, on numerous occasions, exhausted and exasperated, “I just don’t understand how you all can be so nice to your friends and even to strangers, but then be so mean to each other.”

Perhaps Jesus’s disciples were a bit like me and my two sisters—and, I imagine, like many of us. Why is it that we are often more patient, more gracious, and more compassionate with those outside the circles of our family and friends than we are with those inside our circles? I guess the

more time you share with someone, the more time there's been for you all to get under each other's skin, to notice each other's weak spots, to be affected by each other's idiosyncrasies. Ironically, then, the conflict in our lives often occurs not in spite of our closeness with others, but *because* of it. We have conflicts with people precisely because they matter to us.

And conflict isn't the problem, friends. You can love someone while actively disagreeing with them. But you can't love someone while calling them names or while wishing them harm. You can't love someone while trying to get even with them or while talking about them behind their back. You can't love someone while believing that they are inferior to you or while remaining unmoved by their pain.

In chapter 4 of 1 John, we read, "Those who say, 'I love God' and hate their siblings are liars; for those who do not love a sibling, whom they have seen, cannot love God, whom they have not seen. The commandment we have from God is this: those who love God must love their siblings also." As we gather once more at this sacred table, friends, to be nourished by Christ in the final hours of his life and to be united with each other as we follow him to his death, let us remember that everyone will know that we love God because of how we love one another. For Jesus's sake, may it be so. Amen.