

“Making Room for Love”

Based on John 13:31-35

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Today’s scripture passage is at the beginning of what is often called Jesus’ “farewell discourse.” Taking up a few chapters in the gospel of John, this is where we find the meat of John’s expression of what Jesus was all about. You can imagine. Jesus knew that his time with his disciples was drawing to a close. This was no time for frivolous chit chat. This was the time for Jesus to tell his disciples what they needed to know going forward. This is his chance to prepare them for the difficult road that lay ahead for them after he ascends back to heaven. So these chapters have added weight behind them.

Now whether Jesus knew everything the disciples would face or if he had only a general idea, he knew that it would be challenging, that the disciples would be tested in ways they could not foresee. It already began with Judas slipping away to betray Jesus to the authorities. Judas won’t be the only one. Peter will deny Jesus publicly. The disciples will go underground to avoid detection out of fear that what happened to Jesus might happen to them too. They are all a part of the conspiracy. And as they hide out in that upper room to make sense of what has happened to Jesus, they will be wondering what should be their next step. Should they disband? Should someone be selected to be the leader? They will wonder if they did the right thing. With the raw emotions of grief, shame and fear, they may turn on each other. Confusion, hurt, uncertainty. The community of disciples will be fragile.

Knowing that the community will be tested immediately and will experience strain in the days ahead, Jesus gives them a new commandment right off the bat. He doesn’t tell them what they can expect. He doesn’t give them a plan on how to move forward without him. He doesn’t tell them the process for how to select a leader or appoint someone to take charge. Instead, he gives them a commandment. Not a parable. Not a riddle. He doesn’t ask them a perplexing question.

He gives them a clear and direct command. Not a suggestion. A command. It is the commandment to love one another.

This makes sense. What good is it to strategize for the future or select a leader if you don't have a community? Love is the glue that will hold them together as they face an uncertain future without Jesus being physically present with them to lead the way. When it comes to community life, if you don't have healthy, loving relationships then you don't have much. So Jesus first addresses the most immediate concern. Whatever they end up doing, their first priority is to love each other. In times of stress, uncertainty, confusion and fear, that's a good commandment to follow.

But what kind of love is Jesus talking about? Jesus doesn't just tell them to love each other. He clarifies by telling them to love each other in the same way that Jesus loves them. In other words, they are to love each other relentlessly and unconditionally. A love that you can count on. A love that you can never doubt. We know that Jesus and the disciples had conflict along the way. There were times when the disciples got on Jesus' nerve. I'm sure there were times that the disciples got annoyed with Jesus. They were all human beings after all. But there was never a doubt that Jesus loved them. No matter what they will face, they will be able to endure if they love each other relentlessly and unconditionally.

Not only will this love hold the community together, it will also mark them as the disciples of Jesus. People will know that they are his disciples by their love for one another. This will be their evangelical witness. People will know they are disciples of Jesus, not because they talk about Jesus, but because they love like Jesus.

So how does this apply to us? Let's assume that when Jesus told his disciples to love one another as he loved them, that he meant that commandment for us as well. How can our love for one another keep us together when we live in times of great division? I'm not saying that there is great division among us as a congregation. We all get along pretty well, I have to say. But we all know we live in a time where there is a great deal of division in the larger church as well as in society. There are forces attempting to pull us apart. It seems harder and harder to

maintain an “agree to disagree” attitude. We feel pressure to choose sides. We gather into our tribes and avoid relating to others who don’t share our views or convictions.

A reminder that love is not only affection and intimacy. Sometimes love feels different. However love feels, what love is doesn’t change. To me, love means desiring the well-being of the other. And agapé love, the kind of love that Jesus has for us, is love for the well-being of others without limit, even if that means sacrificing self. Even if that means loving people who don’t love you back, people who disagree with you, people who disregard you or are out to get you. Agapé love is the highest form of love. And it is this kind of love that Jesus challenges us to live out in our day to day lives.

To manifest agapé love asks for a creative response. In this moment, dealing with this person, what can I do or say that will provide for the well-being of that person? There’s no right or wrong answer. There could be a number of possibilities. And we can never know for sure if our response will be effective in providing for the well-being of the other person. And let’s be honest. Our responses to others are not always thought out. I think we all have said things we wish we could take back, or act in ways that, after some reflection, makes us wonder what we were thinking. We weren’t thinking! So that’s the other thing about living out agapé love: we may have to slow down when relating with people. Listen more and think before you say anything. Don’t necessarily do the first thing that pops in to your head. Think before you act. Be deliberate and reflective. And, of course, it’s not always clear what is the best thing to say or do. To live this way is an art and it takes time.

Growing up, my family took long road trips for vacation. We often drove out west to Colorado and New Mexico. In the back seat where my sister and I sat there was an invisible barrier between us established by my parents so that we would not touch, poke or pinch each other. We needed that invisible barrier for our own well-being as well as the well-being of our parents! That was a loving act of my parents to come up with a way to help all of us enjoy those hours and hours on the open road. We all needed a little space.

God's intention is for all people to gather together around one table. When we have communion together, you may remember that near the end of the Eucharistic prayer I say "until Christ comes back in final victory and we feast at his heavenly banquet." The idea there is that when we receive communion together we are experiencing a foretaste of a great banquet we will enjoy in heaven. And who will be at that great heavenly banquet? God's intent is for everyone to be there. And what a gathering that will be! So much diversity, multiple languages spoken, skin complexions, and body shapes. A multitude of beliefs and opinions. All of humanity in one place. Our minds can't fully comprehend this kind of gathering that God desires. Beloved community to the ultimate extreme.

The challenge for us is to try to embody God's dream now in this life. What would it take to make our metaphorical tables larger so that there is always room for more? I can imagine that as we make room for more people at God's table of grace that we need to make sure there is some elbow room. People around this table need to have some space to be who they are without the need to conform to the beliefs and practices of others. For their well-being and the well-being of the whole, everyone around the table needs some space.

And that's ok to have some space, whatever that means for you: the space of separate churches and denominations, the space of maintaining separate relational networks, the space of sitting at opposite ends of the table. It's ok to have some space when it is love for one another that brings us to the table in the first place. It is that love that is the glue that keeps us at the table even as we give each other some room, to have the space to be our unique, complex selves. Giving each other space is the loving thing to do. Why squeeze and press into a one size fits all table when we have the freedom to have a bigger table where people can spread out and be comfortable, sit by who they want to sit with while still being at the table? Giving each other space is an act of love.

I want to invite you to spend a few moments in reflection. I have three questions I am going to ask that will prompt you to reflect on your

relationships, with those who you care about and with those who you find to be very challenging to be around.

- in your relationships, where do you need to create some “elbow room” for the well being of yourself and the one you need to make room for?

- is there anyone in your life who you need to drop conditions so that you can love them unconditionally, even while maintaining space between you and them?

- how might the way you live your life change if your focus was always on what is needed in the moment for the well being of others?