A.M.D.G. 3rd Sunday After Easter Text: John 13: 34-35

 April 15th, 2018

**John 13: 12- 17; 34-35**  After he had washed their feet, had put on his robe, and had returned to the table, he said to them, ‘Do you know what I have done to you? You call me Teacher and Lord—and you are right, for that is what I am. So if I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another’s feet. For I have set you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you. Very truly, I tell you, servants are not greater than their master, nor are messengers greater than the one who sent them. If you know these things, you are blessed if you do them.

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.’

**A Candle Against The Wind**

Sometimes the most familiar passages in the Bible are the most difficult to preach. This Sunday's gospel reading is a good example. The passage is so familiar to many of us that most people assume they know it even before they hear it. Besides – what can you really add to Jesus' command to 'love one another' – words that are both ridiculously easy to understand on one hand and ridiculously hard to do on the other?!

Each year after Easter, the lectionary – the 3 year series of Bible readings that we follow most Sundays – hopscotches its way through the Gospel of John. The section we hear from today begins with John's account of the Last Supper. In a poignantly moving act of love, Jesus washes the feet of his disciples and shares a final meal – following which Judas departs to plot his betrayal, and the tension heightens as the final scene in Jesus' life draws ominously closer. It is at this point in the story that Jesus offers these words: *"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."*

Which tells us, I think, a great deal about the kind of love Jesus is talking about. This surely isn't romantic love – nor is it simply being nice – nor is it only loving those who love you back.

Think about it: when Jesus washed his disciples' feet, Judas – the one who was to betray him – was there. Further – he will now demonstrate just how much God loves the world by dying for those who manifestly do not love him. Love is hard because it is self-sacrificing. It means putting the good of the other first – even when it hurts.

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I find it striking that these are the final words Jesus leaves with his disciples. I mean, he could have said, "Go out and die with me." But instead, he offered this simple and challenging word – *love one another*. Why? Because this kind of love is the hallmark, not just of God and Jesus – but also of the Christian church. Rememeber that song made popular in churches several decades ago – *the whole world will know that we are Christians* – not by our sermons – nor by our sacraments, or our buildings - but by our love. It's just that important.

One of my favourite movies is *'Tuesdays With Morrie'*. Has anyone seen it? If not – you are missing out on a truly wonderful opportunity. Based on a true life story, it is a loving memoir to a man whose lessons in life have much to teach us about ourselves. Jack Lemon plays the role of Morrie Schwartz – the Brandeis University professor – and Hank Azaria plays Mitch – an accomplished journalist so driven by his job that he has little time or energy left for anything else. One night, Mitch happens to catch Morrie's appearance on a national news program and learns that his old university professor is battling ALS – Lou Gehrig's disease. After the telecast, Mitch contacts Morrie. And what starts out as a visit turns into something of a pilgrimage as Mitch opens his heart to the lessons Morrie has to teach him. With everything stripped away from him – profession, health, independence – Morrie shares with Mitch the simple truth of what Jesus shares with us in our scripture reading this morning: "*We must love one another or die"* It is just that simple – and just that important.

In his commentary on Galatians, the church father, Jerome, describes how John the Evangelist, author of the Gospel – preached at Ephesus into his nineties. Christian tradition holds that he died in about the year 100 CE. At that age, John was so feeble that he had to be carried into the church at Ephesus on a stretcher. Then – when he could no longer preach a normal sermon – he would lean up on one elbow. And the only things he said was, "*Little children – love one another*." And people would then carry him back out of the church. This continued for weeks, says Jerome. And every week he repeated his one-sentence sermon, *"Little children – love one another."* Finally – weary of the repetition – the congregation asked, "*Master, why do you always say this?*" *"Because,"* John replied, *"it is the Lord's command, and if this only is done – it is enough."* It is enough.

And, of course, we actually can and often do love one another. Sometimes the command to love seems so challenging that we assume it's just an ideal - a lofty goal that none of us will ever reach. But while we may not love perfectly – we do love. I think of people in this congregation – and all the cards, visits, and phone calls made to those who are lonely or people going through a difficult time. I think of the many volunteers at TLC or ESL; or those among us who give of their money and time in many caring ways.

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Take a moment to think back over this past week. Can you identify a moment or situation when you intentionally chose to love - even when it wasn't the easiest thing to do? *(pause)*

Now think about a situation over the past week or two when you found it difficult to love. Perhaps it's been hard to forgive someone who hurt you, to move beyond the disappointment caused by a family member or friend, or to overlook a stinging comment by a colleague or co-worker …. *(pause)*

The truth of the matter is that we do love regularly – and that we do fail, regularly. And church, I think, should be a place where we can give thanks for the former and pray about the latter.

The good news this morning is that whether we succeed or fail in our attempts to love one another this week – God in Jesus loves us more than we can possibly imagine. And anchored in that love – we are set free and sent forth, once again, to love one another. It's just that important.

In his book of poetry called 'Leavings', published last year, Wendell Berry offers us this poem prayer:

 "I know that I have life

 only insofar as I have love.

 I have no love

 except it comes from Thee.

 Help me, please, to carry

 this candle against the wind."

May it be so for all of us into these coming days.