

A Sermon Preached by Gregory Hall at Clarence Presbyterian Church on Sunday October 30, 2022.

THE NEED FOR CHRISTIAN UNITY

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. ~John 13:34-35

About ten years ago some thirty members of this congregation went on a tour of Scotland and the North of England. One of the places that we visited were the ruins of an ancient monastery overlooking the sea, above the town of Whitby. Whitby was an unusual double monastery, meaning it had a side for men and a side for women. For many years it was ruled by a formidable Abbas by the name of Hilda. This monastery served as the host of a Synod held in 664AD in which unity was brought to the Christ Church in Britain.

The history of the Christian movement in Britain had ups and downs over time. Christianity had been planted in Britain during the time of Roman occupation. But the pagan Saxons had invaded and Christianity had been much diminished. Christianity returned to the Island through two different missionary streams. One came from Rome. Augustine landed in the south and centered his mission at Canterbury and moved north. Another was led by Columba who centered his mission on Iona and moved south.

These were both Christian missionaries, but with different flavors. The Celtic Church was largely led by monks and centered around monasteries, seeing God in nature and community. The Roman Church centered more on Bishops, theology and good order. Over time the two groups came in contact in the north of England.

The differences in the two traditions caused tension between the two groups. One of the differences was how the date of Easter was determined. They used two different ways of determining the calendar. This might not seem to be such a big deal today. But in the early years of the Christian movement, the church calendar determined what you can eat. During Lent people fasted, on Easter they feasted.

This problem came to a head when a Northumbrian King who followed Celtic traditions married a Queen who followed Roman practice. This meant there were times that the King would be fasting for Lent while the Queen wanted a feast. This created problems and not just for the cook. The royal court was split with each side trying to force its will on the other.

Both traditions came to Whitby to state their positions on the issues. By the end of the Synod a consensus had been formed. Most of the issues were settled in favor of the Roman tradition. By the end of the meeting unity had been restored to the Christian movement in Britain.

Why is Christian unity important? We live in a time of a very fractured Christian movement. The Christian church over the last thousand years has splintered into many groups that have little contact with each other. Next week we will learn of the Great Schism that separated Western Christianity from Eastern Orthodoxy. The Protestant Reformation started a process of disintegration in Western Christianity. Today, there are more independent

denominations scattered around the world than we can count. Some groups claim they are the only true Christians, while others merely believe they are the best option. In 2022 we are witnessing the United Methodists no longer being united by breaking in two worldwide.

This reality should be shocking for us, but it is not, for we take the brokenness of the Church for granted. We do not even expect Christians to be unified. The Ecumenical movement that flourished after World War II has faded. Congregations and denominations have turned away from seeking common ground and cooperation, to looking inward to institutional survival.

Thus, our reading from John's Gospel should be jolting to us. Our text for today comes from the chapter of the Gospel of John that records events of Jesus' last time with his disciples in the upper room. John tells the story of Jesus washing his disciples' feet. Jesus then told the disciples that they must do the same for each other. In washing their feet, Jesus was illustrating a new teaching. In this last evening with his followers, he gives them a new commandment to love one another even as he has loved them. He had illustrated this love by washing his disciples' feet.

In this passage Jesus says **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.**

Who is Jesus speaking to and about in this passage? He is speaking in the Upper Room. Jesus and his disciples have withdrawn from the masses. They have found a place of privacy. He has washed their feet and Judas has just left the group to go to the authorities in order to betray Jesus. This is the last time he will talk to his loyal followers. He tells them that soon he will be going away to a place they cannot follow. This is one of his final instructions to his disciples. He tells them to love one another.

From this context, we may conclude that Jesus is commanding Christians to love one another in a unique way. For both the subject and the object of his commandment are the disciples.

This special love for fellow Christians might seem strange at first. It sounds like a retreat from what we are told is the universal nature of God's love. Yet at other times Jesus has spoken about the universal nature of God's love. He has spoken about loving our neighbors as ourselves. But Jesus here calls upon Christians to show a special love for each other.

This new love is one based on Christ as the center of our lives. People who have common interests and loyalties have something to share. Our daughter went to an all girl's high school. It had a Father –Daughter Dance each spring. The first year I went with a little trepidation. We were seated at a table with four other girls and their fathers. Rachel knew the girls; I did not know anyone. My first thought was how was I going to get through the evening. But then the father sitting next to me asked what I thought about the upcoming baseball season. The rest of the time eating dinner went very quickly as we sized up what might happen in the American League that year. This common interest brought us together.

Christians have a stronger bond that holds us together. Being a baseball fan is only a small part of one's life, but following Jesus entails all of our being. We share the same cornerstone on which we build our lives. Jesus is the center of our lives. We Christians are drawn into a special

relationship in the church. Jesus gave a special commandment to love one another.

A second strange facet of this new commandment is that Jesus commands us to love. Command to love is strange to our ear. Love is often thought of as a feeling over which we have little control. Yet Jesus commands us to love fellow Christians. Love for Jesus is not primarily a matter of feelings. Love is not abstract. For Jesus love is action. Love is made up of service and not warm feelings for others.

Jesus did not only command us to love one another, he demonstrated that love when he poured water into a basin and took a towel and washed his disciples' feet. Jesus took on the role and duty of the hired help to demonstrate the simple humble love that he commands us to show to other Christians.

One of the duties of the church is to demonstrate this love. You and I can seek to express this love. There are countless ways we can express our love to one another in small acts. We can love those in our Church by visiting a shut-in, sharing food with those who are sick or caring for children, or reaching out to those who are lonely. For fellow Christians around the world we can give to Missions and pray for their well-being. We have a duty to find ways to support all our Christian brothers and sisters who have been subject to persecution and dislocation in the Middle East, Ukraine and other places in the world.

I know that I am not always perfect in loving fellow Christians; I know we as a congregation fail at times to reach out to each other, but our goal should be to grow in our commitment to Jesus' command to love one another.

A third interesting facet to this new commandment is its purpose. Jesus says **By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.** Love seems to be what I would call the uniform of a Christian. Just as we know a police officer by the blue uniform and a nurse by the scrubs and the Buffalo Bills by their helmets and colors, so Jesus tells us that the world is to recognize Christians by how they love one another.

This uniform is important because it proclaims what the love of God is all about. The Gospel proclaims that men and women can be reconciled to God and to each other. By loving each other in a visible way, we show that the Gospel is true, that the barriers which separate person from person have been broken down by Christ. Our love for fellow Christians demonstrates the divine love to the world.

This love is important because it draws people to Christ and the Church. Many of us have gone into different churches and discovered they can have very different atmospheres. Some are warm and inviting where it is clear that people care for one another. There are others that are cold and appear to be made up of solitary figures who have no relation to each other. It is the warm loving congregations that draw people to Christ.

My earliest memories of Church are not of Sunday school or worship services, but rather church picnics and dinners. These were times where everyone gathered around tables having fun together and then sometimes working on a project. People gathered together to enjoy and support each other serving Christ helped lead me to faith. Much of the success of the early church can be found in a quote from Tertullian who reported that the pagan Romans speaking about Christians would exclaim, "See how they love one another!"

Yet how does the splintered Christian church serve as a witness to the world. We live in an increasingly pluralistic world. We see this in our local communities. When I was young there were only houses of worship for Christians and occasionally a Jewish Synagogue. Today there are houses of worship for a whole host of religious movements from around the world. There are increasing numbers of people who have never been exposed to any religious faith.

What kind of witness to Jesus' love does a fractured Christian Church make? We claim we follow the one who reconciles the world to God and we cannot find a way to love each other. If we are to share the Good News of Jesus with others, we first must become one with fellow believers. **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.**

The Synod of Whitby restored Christian unity in Britain. This unity made the church stronger and better able to deal with difficulties that were to come. A little over one hundred years after Whitby, Vikings attacked the Monastery on Lindisfarne. This began a series of raids and invasions that threatened the very existence of the Church. It was partly the unity found at Whitby that not only allowed the Church to survive, but its witness led to the conversion of the pagan Vikings.

We are living as Christians in a very different environment than one hundred years ago. There are many cultural headwinds that threaten our survival as a Christian movement. Maybe when Christianity had cultural hegemony we could afford disunity. As we move into the future we must reach out to different Christian traditions. I do not know if we must move towards the creating of one institutional church, but we must learn to respect and work with each other to provide a common witness to the world. Our primary identity should not be a Presbyterian, Roman Catholic, Methodist, Baptist, Lutheran, Assembly of God or anything else. We are followers of Jesus and are called to love all who seek to follow the Risen Lord.

Jesus tells us it is that love between Christians that serves to show demonstrate the Gospel for the world. The love between Christians is important because of the power it releases. The love for fellow Christians is creative. It builds up the people involved. Just as power was released by Jesus' love for us on the cross, so too power is released when we love one another.

How important is all this? The story is told that the Apostle John lived to become a very old man. Tradition tells us that he spent his last years living in Ephesus. In his later years he became quite feeble. This meant that others would carry him into church. He could barely speak, yet he never failed to repeat what he considered to be his most important council to the church "Little children love one another."

John had been changed that night long ago, that last night with his Lord in the Upper Room, when Jesus had taken some water, a bowl and a towel and washed his feet. That example of humble serving love had shaped John's life.

So today, you and I are challenged by Jesus' example of love, to learn, to serve and love each other not only in this congregation but across the body of Christ. Let us learn from Whitby that there no greater need today than unity among Christians.