

“Love One Another!” – Stephanie Wing, 5.2.10

If you could find out the exact time of your death, would you want to know?

It's a tough question. On one hand, it would be hard not to let that knowledge cloud over everything in life. On the other hand, if we had more time to prepare for our own death, perhaps we would prioritize things in our life differently. We might gather together those whom we loved the most one final time, to tell them how much we loved them, and to give them any parting words of wisdom for them to carry after we are gone.

That is the scene of our reading from John today. The "he" who has just departed is Judas. The scene is the Last Supper. Unlike the other gospel accounts, which identify the Last Supper with the Passover feast, John places the Last Supper just before Passover. This gathering isn't simply the practice of an important holy day; it is a farewell dinner, though Jesus is the only one who knows it. Jesus knows that his time is quickly running out, and he gathers his closest friends together for one final meal. He washes their feet, and then gives to Judas a piece of bread, indicating that he is the one who is about to betray him. And then Judas leaves.

I imagine that Jesus' heart was very heavy in that moment. He had come to love completely and to love without condition. He had come to give his life for the world. The broken bread symbolized his body that was about to be broken in violence, and he offered it freely, and lovingly, to the one who was about to betray

him. I wonder if Jesus had hoped for one last shot at reconciliation. It wasn't too late - Judas could still turn back from what he was about to do. But he didn't. As Judas walked away, I think that Jesus' heart broke for him, because Judas could not accept the love that he was so eager to give.

Perhaps he took a minute to regain his composure. However it happened, after Judas left, Jesus turned to the disciples who remained. He didn't have much time, and so he wanted to leave them with the heart of his message. If they forgot everything else he said, they would be okay as long as they remembered this: "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." It is so simple, a young child could quickly and easily memorize this commandment.

Jesus calls it a new commandment, but it is hardly new! There has been a tendency in the church to see the God of the Old Testament as a God of wrath, and the God of the New Testament as the God of Love, but that is an error on many levels. First, they are one and the same God. The God of the Old Testament IS the God of the New Testament. Second, it has the potential to lead Christians to theological judgment over our Jewish brothers and sisters. Third, we see examples of God's amazing love and God's righteous anger in both testaments.

This "new commandment" was first given in Leviticus 19:18, when the Lord says, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." So what makes it new? We have

a new, incarnational model for this love. Jesus calls his disciples to love one another, and he is the example for what that love looks like. Never before and not since has there been a person who showed God's love to others so completely. That is the model of perfect love.

There are plenty of models in our world of imperfect love. We don't need to look far at all, do we? It is sometimes difficult to love those with whom we disagree, or those who are very different from us. Our reading from Acts reminds us that, though we tend to make divisions among ourselves based on superficial differences, we are not to judge. We are simply to reach out to all people with the love of God.

Sometimes, though, it is hardest to show love, to treat with real love, those whom we love the most - the ones that are closest to us. Family feuds are some of the hardest divisions to bridge. The saying that fences make good neighbors is a saying for a reason. It is hard to live in close proximity to other people without bumping into each other every now and then. Just look at the parking woes we have with our Baptist neighbors!

Beyond our physical neighbors, the people to whom we are closest are often the ones who see us at our best and worst, aren't they? In some cases, it is the result of two different selves bumping into each other, negotiating the "me" and the "you" boundaries in the relationship. There isn't as much "me" space in relationship. We are also most vulnerable and most open to those who are closest

to us. We can be more quickly and deeply hurt by those to whom our hearts are most open, even when there was no offense intended. When we open ourselves to others, they can see us for who we really are, and that can be scary. To be open like that is to lay bare our needs and our feelings, and to entrust their care to those who love us. That is scary and dangerous, and so we often work hard to maintain some walls for self-preservation.

The commandment from Leviticus, which is also repeated in Matthew 22:39, is to "love your neighbor as yourself." But there is one problem - we are often so relationally challenged that we don't even know how to love ourselves properly. Some of us might have an over-inflated sense of self-worth: pride. Many of us have an undervalued sense of self: self-negation. And it isn't that cut and dry. Often pride masks places of vulnerability. We don't know how to love ourselves. We get upset with ourselves for doing things that we don't want to do, for hurting others, or for having bad attitudes. On the other hand, we tend to love ourselves more than others, to look out for the self above everyone else. It is a matter of selfishness and sometimes a matter of self-preservation. If we have been hurt by close relationships in the past, perhaps we have learned that the only person you can rely on is yourself.

So this new commandment that we read in John, to "love one another, just as I have loved you," takes on some new meaning. The model for loving each other does not come from how we love our selves, but rather comes from how God loves

us. That is the only perfect example of love, and though it is a constant challenge, it is the mark to which we aim.

There is another nuance that I want to look at in that commandment. God's love for us is not only the model, it is also the necessary condition for any attempt we make at loving other people. If we cannot accept God's love, given freely and unconditionally, how can we feel lovable? How can we love ourselves if we can't accept the truth that God loves us, just as we are? And if we can't accept God's love or learn to love ourselves as God loves us, how can we give or receive love to or from anyone else?

God's love for us is foundational for everything else. If we accept that God loves us simply because we are, because we are God's beloved children, then we must love ourselves the same way. If we love ourselves simply because we know who we are and whose we are, then we can also love our neighbors as ourselves, loving them because we know that they, too, are God's beloved children.

It's not easy. It never has been. One of the great tragedies of the story of Judas is that he couldn't accept the love that Jesus was so eager to give. Not being able to accept that love, of course he couldn't love himself, and we know how that story ended - with Judas taking his own life. There are many people in the world today who do not feel lovable, or worthy of any love or affection. They are deeply wounded souls. Sometimes we might feel like that ourselves. They need to know,

and we need to know, that we are loved, unconditionally, because we are God's beloved children.

As Christians we are called to show love to each other. It is so foundational that Jesus says it is how others will know that we are his disciples - because we love one another. But it works another way, too, because when we open ourselves completely to God's love, we are transformed. We are changed in the knowledge and acceptance of God's undying love for us that loved us enough to die. That love transforms us from the inside out. It enables us to reach out in new ways to share that love with others. Others will know that we are disciples of Jesus Christ because they will recognize the transformation. They will recognize that the love we share is like nothing else on earth.

It isn't easy. We have our good days and bad days, days when we feel full of love, and days when we feel full of something else. Transformation is an ongoing process. We are continually being made into a new creation through the love of God. First we must be open to receive God's love, and to love ourselves simply because we are children of the God of love. And then, only then, can we start to love others, as God has loved us. May it be so!