

“Are We Going to Get Any Better?”

May 2, 2010: Acts 13:44-52; Ps. 145; Rev. 19:1, 4-9; John 13:31-35

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Jesus said, *“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)

It seems a bit dissonant to hear this Maundy Thursday Gospel passage on the fifth Sunday of Easter; its sort of like hearing the nativity story in July, its out of context. But then again, maybe we Christians should read this passage on Jesus’ new commandment every day. Or better yet, create a Christian version of the Orthodox Jewish *teffilin*; small black boxes containing critical scripture verses that are then strapped to the forehead and arms: an outward and visible sign of how we are to follow the new commandment every moment, every day of our life.

Earl Weaver, who was the manager of the Baltimore Orioles for years, was a notorious umpire baiter - he could harass an ump with the best of them (Alright, I know that at this moment there are many of you who are in awe of my offering a sermon with a sports illustration! But, hey God works in wondrous ways! Pay attention, it works.). Weaver was especially known for one particular taunt. Whenever he disagreed with a call, he’d typically run out of the dugout, charge into the umpire’s face and scream at him: “Are you gonna get any better, or is this it?”

As I look at the state of the world we live in, I often find myself asking this very same question; “Are we gonna get any better at following the Gospel, or is this it?”

It can get frustrating at times wondering just when will we - you and I - really get the Gospel message and live it consistently?

The older I get, the more convinced I become that what the world, the church, our society and my own life need more than anything else - what it needs most desperately - more than doctrine, military strength, diplomatic skills, savvy foreign policy, more than funding for programs, more than political correctness, more than zeal - is love. In a nutshell, we need the new commandment.

If you are of a certain age, you will remember that popular 1960's song written and composed by Hal David and Burt Bacharach, *What the World Needs Now Is Love, Sweet Love*? Well, that’s what we all need, a huge injection of love.

“What the world needs now is love, sweet love, it's the only thing that there's just too little of. What the world needs now is love, sweet love, no, not just for some, but for everyone.

Well the same is as true now as it was in the 60's, and as it was in the days of the original lyricist, Jesus. Because the lyrics of that song are nothing more than the essence of, “A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another.” Jesus and his emulators, David and Bacharach had it right: What the world does need now is love sweet love, it’s the only thing that there’s just too little of.

So back to my question: how about us, are we going to get any better at understanding and living the new commandment? Or

is where we are in our life right now, *it* for us? If we lack loving others as Jesus loved us, is there any hope for us? A recent Letter to the Editor in *The Plain Dealer* begs this very question.

The writer wrote to deride the new national health care bill and those in our society who - until now living without health insurance - will now be given some measure of security in their healthcare. The writer advocated for the national healthcare bill to be repealed. He stated that, "those who contribute nothing to society" are "similar to [the] pigeons [in Public Square] looking for a handout!"

If you are not aghast at these comments, we need to have a consultation. It chilled my blood when I read them. Boiled it as well! And if you're thinking this is some lone, crackpot spewing off in the local newspaper, think again. This sense of entitlement to basic human services because, "I worked harder" or "I contribute more" or "I deserve it" or "I am -fill in the blank here - native born, white, Christian, blah, blah, blah," is very prevalent in our country. There is no shortage of people who hold that belief.

As a student of history, I recognize this dehumanizing tactic the writer engaged in for what it was: a tactic that has been used repeatedly throughout human history to justify not, "respect[in] the dignity of every human being." I.e., of not loving your neighbor as yourself, or not loving others as Jesus loved us.

You may recall the Nazis were particularly effective at this dehumanizing tactic when they classified Jews as vermin. Portraying Jews as people who contributed nothing to society and in fact were a threat to it, made the final solution seem no more heinous than bringing in the Orkin man to rid oneself of mice or ants. The Nazi's tactics convinced too many Germans to think, "hey I work hard and the Jews don't. What are they other than a drain to the resources which I deserve. They're not even really fully human. We are better off with out them."

It is not to engage in hyperbole to say that the mind-set of the writer of that letter to the editor is on a similar proverbial slippery slope. When we engage in likening human beings to pigeons seeking a handout, - pigeons that are in many people's minds one step from being vermin - the de-humanizing dominos begin to fall toward disaster. This comment may seem innocuous to some folks in Greater Cleveland, but it should be a flashing red light, screaming danger to people who profess to follow Jesus Christ. It is completely devoid of love.

I am convinced that nothing will distinguish us as Christ's followers more clearly in the world than a genuine commitment to love radically, earnestly, and deeply. It is the antidote to the insidious and evil de-humanization of the other that is a cancer in the life of the world.

Now I know that's a pretty tall order. How do we hope to love one another in a world filled with people infected by evil like the letter writer? The answer lies in the way that Jesus addresses his disciples in today's Gospel, when he gives them the new commandment: He calls them, "little children." And the expression of love on Jesus' face as he addresses those disciples as little children is self-explanatory. It is the face of total, abundant, radical and complete love; even - most especially - in the face of evil.

It is the face of love we put on when we house the homeless and feed the hungry. It is the face of love we put on when we work to forgive those who have wronged us, maligned us, hurt us. It is the face of love we put on when we visit Martha Ray, Pearl Hill or one of the resident's of Shaker Gardens. It is the face of love we put on when we radically welcome every person who walks through our doors, regardless of whom or what they are or whether they like us. It is the face of love we put on when we speak the truth in love, even when what we have to say makes others uncomfortable or even angry. It is the face of love that hung on a cross for our sins.

You see, when you reduce Christianity down to its pure essence, what you have left is not a doctrine, or a creed or a liturgy, or a complicated theology, what you have left is a face. It is the face of total, unambiguous, undiluted love. Love that can be both compassionate, but can also give us a kick in the pants now and then. When Jesus was here on earth, he showed us that love is more than a sentiment, or an emotion - it is something you do to and for another person. In the end love is always something you do.

Wouldn't it be wonderful to be known by that love? The truth is, that kind of love is the only thing that will make us recognizable to the world. It is that love that will eradicate neither the sins of de-humanization nor the sins of hoarding the resources of this earth for a few, when God made enough for all. And that love is the only thing that can ultimately bring salvation to the world.

But we can't just say we believe in that love and then not do it . . . not live it. Like I said it is something we do. Because, if we proclaim that love to the world, but do not live it, the world sees us as just a bunch of hypocrites. And God knows the last thing the world needs are more Christians who are hypocrites! We have a bumper crop of those these days.

At one point in the musical *My Fair Lady*, Eliza Doolittle, the girl being schooled in the art of being a lady cries out in frustration, "Words, words, words! I'm so tired of words! Don't talk to me of love, don't talk to me of June, don't talk to me of anything at all, *just show me.*" Just show me love.

So I ask you, "Are we gonna get any better, or is this it?" I know God's answer: "Love one another, as I have loved you. Just show me."

Amen.