

# Sermons at Union Congregational Church

Preached by Rev. Gail L. Miller, Pastor

April 9, 2009 Maundy Thursday

John 13:31-35

## LOVE ON COMMAND

"Maundy Thursday" gets its name from this passage I just read from John's gospel. The word "maundy" comes from the Latin antiphon sung on this night during the ceremonial foot washing in Roman and other liturgical churches. It begins begins: *mandatum novum* - which means "a new commandment." And the command is to love one another.

Which is really quite odd when you think about it. When I started thinking about love being commanded, I immediately thought of that song from 1991 that Bonnie Raitt sang. It's called: *I can't make you love me*

I can't make you love me if you don't  
you can't make your heart feel  
somethin' it won't  
here in the dark, in these final hours  
I will lay down my heart  
and I feel the power if you won't  
no you won't  
'cuz I can't make you love me  
if you don't

If you've ever loved someone who did not love you back, Bonnie Raitt makes a lot more sense than Jesus when talking about love.

But still, the message of this commandment is clear. However the love Jesus is talking about is not the kind of love Bonnie Raitt sings about or that we're used to hearing about (esp. in pop music).

I can remember as a kid / preteen, my grandma telling me to love my brother even though I was sure I was hating him. I was supposed to love him simply because he was my brother and that's what families do. They love each other whether they want to or not. Although the idea of loving somebody because I was supposed to made absolutely no sense to me.

Now that I look back on it, that was probably the first time I discovered that liking someone and loving them had little to do with each other.

And that idea is still difficult to grasp, at least if we believe that love has anything to do with how we feel. Our culture has cheapened love by using the word carelessly. We have confused the sentimentality of the Hallmark card with the deep, dark mystery of love that is manifested for us in Jesus Christ.

Yes love can be warm, enfolding and sheltering and it can feel good. But love can also be strong and difficult. It can even be an impossible challenge.

What does it mean to love one another on command? What does it mean to love one another when we are tired, annoyed or angry? When we don't feel loving or lovable?

And what does it mean to love one another as Christ has loved us - to love with an open hand without wanting anything in return, to love in appreciation of one another?

To be clear, Jesus is not commanding us to be doormats, to let ourselves be hooked into unhealthy and manipulative entanglements in the name of love. As our awareness of psychological issues grows, we are increasingly aware that there are wrong kinds of love, and false loves that smother and devour people.

But that's not what this is about. The love Jesus is commanding is a new kind of love. Let's look at the text. Jesus has gathered with his disciples for a last meal together before he is to be crucified. He has just taken the role of servant, knelt before them and washed their feet. He has foretold his betrayal, and Judas has left the gathering.

The command to love is not theoretical teaching about an impossible abstraction. No, it is embedded in a richly dramatic scene where the human limitations and weaknesses of the disciples are very clear. The command to love is not for the spiritual elite, but for ordinary people - like the disciples, like us.

So what does this love look like?

Well, if we follow Jesus' example, we will willingly accept the role of a servant, the one who kneels on the floor to wash the dusty feet of another. And we will also assume the role of the disciple who lets himself or herself be the one who is to be cared for by the other.

Good servants are a vanishing breed: they are most often found on Masterpiece Theater and in Merchant-Ivory films. No one really thinks about them as long as they do their job. They do the work that needs to be done, the work that no one else wants to do and they do it without being noticed and without reward.

When we love one another as Jesus loves us, we put aside our grudges, hurts and righteous anger. Too often we love with our fingers crossed.

“I'm ready to love almost everyone, but surely I can't be expected to love the person who has hurt me, or who does not wish me well, or who seems hopelessly wrong-headed.”

Well this commandment has no loopholes.

It is not enough to simply say, "I love you." It must be lived. Jesus demonstrated this by washing the disciples' feet, reminding us that we are to serve one another. He next showed it by sharing his last meal with his disciples, which instituted the sacrament of Holy Communion.

And our participation in the Lord's Supper is a truly a "communion," because it makes many of us one. Each time we receive communion in faith, separate though we are, we are made all one body - that of Christ. To serve one another, then, is to serve Christ.

There's a movie called *Places in the Heart* (1984), Set in 1935, Texas, the movie begins with the local sheriff who is accidentally killed by a drunken gunman. His wife, Edna, is suddenly thrust into the role of providing for her two small children, when an out-of-work black man begging for every meal in the racist South of the Depression era, happens along with a scheme to plant cotton on her forty acres.

They endure a terrible tornado and still are able to bring the first load of cotton to the mill, winning enough prize money to save her mortgage. The local businessmen cannot bear that a black man has been more successful than the other white farmers and so the Ku Klux Klan come to the farm and beat him, driving him away.

What's so amazing about the film is not this little family triumphing over hardship or even the racial barriers that are broken down, but rather the final scene, which is set in the white folks church as they are sharing communion. As the camera moves through the congregation as they pass the trays as we usually do, we see an impossible scene.

Not only are there black and white people sharing the same room and the same pew, but people who have died are also present, including the sheriff the black boy who shot him. This is the body of Christ and the communion of saints – Christ's love is shared in the bread and the cup.

This is the love Jesus is commanding: a love that transcends even the barrier between death and life. Is it possible, this side of the kingdom? I don't know, but a good first step are the steps you'll take as you approach this table, where we receive a foretaste of the feast to come.

On this night when both supper and command were given, may we begin anew to love one another as he first loved us.

Amen.