

## Reflection for Sunday, May 15, 2022

### John 13:31-35

*Welcome and Peace ...*

#### **Introduction**

When I was growing up sometimes on a nice summer evening after dinner my family would go for a walk. I remember holding my mom's hand, skipping along. Sometimes we would sing (very off-key). We often sung hymns – I think because they were the only songs we all knew the words to. One of my favourites was "We are one in the Spirit."

*We are one in the Spirit,  
We are one in the Lord,  
And we pray that all unity,  
may one day be restored.*

*And they'll know we are Christians  
by our love by our love.*

*We will walk with each other,  
We will walk hand by hand,  
And together we'll spread the news  
that God is in our land.*

*We will work with each other,  
We will work side by side,  
And we'll guard each one's dignity  
and save each one's pride.*

*And they'll know we are Christians  
by our love, by our love.  
Yes, they'll know we are Christians by our love.*

"They know we are Christians by our love."

#### **The Story**

Today's gospel reading the book of John is as simple, and as challenging as that – love another one another, just as Jesus loved us.

The story takes us back before the resurrection. We are with the disciples, having a meal. We know that this is the final meal that Jesus will eat with his friends, but they don't yet understand.

With love and humility, Jesus has taken on a servant's role and washed the feet of the disciples. He has shown them that their notion of a power relationship should be turned on its head: all, particularly those who lead, are called to care for and serve one another.

I wonder what the world would look like if our political leaders followed this Jesus' example. I am grateful for grace and forgiveness when I don't live up to this example.

After washing their feet and told them to do likewise, Jesus gives what is called the "farewell discourses" – basically Jesus' last words of guidance and consolation for his followers as he prepares to leave. Jesus then reveals that one of the disciples is about to betray him. Shocked and hurt, those gathered around the table cannot believe that this is true. Surely, they all trusted and followed Jesus and believed in him. Yet Judas gets up from the table and disappearing into the night.

The disciples are thrown into flux, having their understandings of the world turned upside down. To lead is to serve. Trust can be broken. What would happen next?

It is at this dark moment that our text begins, when Judas had gone out. We might expect a speech about how evil Judas is and how awful the consequences of his actions will be for him. Instead, Jesus focuses on his mission and preparing his disciples for what is to come. Instead, he preaches love.

It is just four verses, so I am going to read them to you again. As I do, I invite you to reflect upon the power of Jesus' words following the revelation of Judas' betrayal.

*When Judas was gone, Jesus said, "Now the Human One has been glorified, and God has been glorified in him. <sup>32</sup> If God has been glorified in him, God will also glorify the Human One in himself and will glorify him immediately. <sup>33</sup> Little children, I'm with you for a little while longer. You will look for me—but, just as I told the Jewish leaders, I also tell you now—'Where I'm going, you can't come.'*

*<sup>34</sup> "I give you a new commandment: Love each other. Just as I have loved you, so you also must love each other. <sup>35</sup> This is how everyone will know that you are my disciples, when you love each other." (John 13:31-35)*

### **What's "New" about this commandment?**

The first thing to notice about this "new commandment" is that, on the surface at least, it isn't particularly new; commands to love, after all, are at least as old as Leviticus (Lev 19:18). What's "new" here, then, must be in the second phrase: "as I have loved you."

The cross and resurrection haven't happened yet, of course — so how has Jesus loved them so far? (*pause for congregation to name ways Jesus has shown his love*).

As it turns out, Jesus has provided an example of his love just prior to our text for today: the foot washing (John 13:1-17). This particular foot washing is far from a generic call to kindness or servanthood, it is a distinctive, subversive, and surprising model in at least two ways.

First, the footwashing upends conventional wisdom about social status, power, and prestige. In the ancient Near East, servants would commonly wash their masters' feet — but Jesus reverses these “above” and “below” roles.

Second, the foot washing upends conventional wisdom about purity and impurity, “clean” and “unclean.” When Jesus explains that the foot washing will allow Peter to have a “share with me” (or to “participate in me”), Peter enthusiastically asks for a full bath. Why? We might initially think he just wants a bigger “share,” but Jesus’ response (*You’re already “entirely clean”!* (John 13:10)) suggests instead that what’s on Peter’s mind is a mistaken belief that he requires purification. Jesus assures him otherwise, as if to say, *Don’t doubt your worth or propriety — I’m not washing you because you’re unclean, but rather in order to demonstrate the kind of dignifying love I have in mind (John 13:6-10). You aren’t greater than me, mind you (John 13:16), but neither are you lesser; I will call you not “servants,” but “friends” (John 15:12-15). I kneel and wash your feet to drive this point home, to set an example for you, so you might go and do likewise for one another. Listen: I’m leaving, and I’m entrusting my love to you. Take up my mantle! Love as I have loved you, making friends, not servants, bridging divides between “above” and “below,” “insider” and “outsider,” “clean” and “unclean.”*

The reading from Revelation talks about a new heaven and a new earth – when God is with us. God, Godself, wiping away our tears. The love Jesus shows the world, changes the world. God’s love is always creating and transforming. If we let it, it can transform us.

It sounds simple, right? Just love each other.

My mom had this book of Peanuts cartoons, where Snoopy and the gang had these one liners “Love is a rainbow after the storm,” “Love is birthday balloons.”  
(*I wonder what love is for you...*)

‘Love one another.’ It is the simplest commandment, yet surely the most difficult. There are some people that are easy to love, but we all have those people who push our buttons. Sometimes its groups of people that get us going (that “Freedom Convey” makes me want to rant). Even in our closest relationships – spouses, family, friendships, colleagues – there are moments when love is hard. I don’t have to name them, you know what I am talking about.

Jesus challenges us to understand love differently. To love hard. Our text follows the moment when the betrayal of Jesus at the hands of Judas is revealed. I try to think what my reaction might have been, if I was in Jesus’ place. Would I speak words of love, or would I be angry,

would I just give Judas and Peter the cold shoulder, not wanting to engage? Would there be emotional words like disappointment and hurt?

There is no limitation to the command Jesus gives to love one another. He does not ask the disciples to love each other but not Judas. He simply calls them to love as he does. It means serving one another, even in the most menial tasks. But this love encompasses heroic acts of great risk; it extends even to point of giving one's life for another.

*(the difference reading this text on Maundy Thursday verses here after the resurrection, approaching Pentecost = COMMUNITY)*

## **Conclusion**

Familiar as it is, Jesus' "new commandment" is much more than a humdrum call to kindness. On the contrary, it's a summons to a distinctive, subversive, surprising form of love, bridging social divides between "above" and "below," "insider" and "outsider," "clean" and "unclean."

Jesus demonstrates to us that love shows up with more than words. The foot washing itself is a live demonstration of how this kind of love looks and feels — and a glimpse of the community it creates. Don't servants wash the feet of masters? Well, yes — but here Jesus does the opposite, levelling the field and redefining the relationship as "friends" (John 15:12-15). Isn't the world as we know it divided into worthy and unworthy, insider and outsider, "clean" and "unclean"? Well, yes — but here Jesus pronounces Peter "entirely clean," and likewise, in Acts, Peter proclaims that the Spirit's love is open to all, Jews and Gentiles alike.

Accordingly, following Jesus' "new commandment" today means living out this dignifying, levelling, bridge-building love in our own lives and circumstances. When Pope Francis — in one of his first public acts as pope — washed and kissed the feet of twelve inmates at a youth prison on Maundy Thursday, including (for the first time in papal history) two women and two Muslims, he embodied this "new commandment" love in his context.

So did Keshia Thomas, the African-American teen who (in 1996) helped a man with a Confederate flag t-shirt and an SS tattoo, physically shielding him from an angry crowd ([The teenager who saved a man with an SS tattoo - BBC News](#)). And so does anyone today whose love helps knit a broken, divided world back together, stitch by stitch by stitch...

This "new commandment" love defies expectations, transforms conventions, builds bridges precisely where no bridge is supposed to be possible. Accordingly, it often takes us by surprise. And then, upon reflection, it presses the question:

*How might we love in this way?*

*Who, in our community/church, are considered low, unclean, unworthy, cast out?*

*How can we, with the Spirit's grace, help build bridges of love and friendship in unexpected places? At its best, "new commandment" love is humble enough to kneel and wash, to "take the form of a servant" — and at the same time, bold enough to protect and connect, overturn conventions, and let the surprising, beautiful glory of God shine through.*

Humble and bold, ordinary and radiant, reconciling the world, stitch by stitch by stitch. *By this love, Jesus says, the love that remakes the world, everyone will know that you are my disciples* (John 13:35).

**Sources:**

<https://www.saltproject.org>

[www.workingpreacher.org](http://www.workingpreacher.org)

<https://www.spiritualityofconflict.com/>

Feasting on the Word commentary

**LOVE**

*Love one another as I have loved you. —John 13.34*

Love is not a feeling  
but an act,  
a movement of the heart from here to there,  
of gratitude and reverence for someone,  
a commitment to their well-being,  
to share space with them  
in the circle of being,  
to being co-members in this Body of life.  
It is a giving-and-receiving of being.

Love is not a wanting,  
you for myself,  
(though that's what we too easily call love),  
not for my sake at all,  
but, yes, a yearning, unfinished,  
like gravity,  
for mutual wholeness.

It's this pull  
that holds the world together,  
that alone will save us  
from our splintered wanderings,  
our solitary confinement,  
our lonely rage.

To yearn for one another  
as we have been yearned for

is the blessing that redeems us,  
the settling that answers our gravity's desire.

by Steve Garnaas-Holmes [www.unfoldinglight.net](http://www.unfoldinglight.net)

## The teenager who saved a man with an SS tattoo

By Catherine Wynne

BBC News [www.bbc.com/news/magazine-2465343](http://www.bbc.com/news/magazine-2465343)

Published 29 October 2013

**In 1996, a black teenager protected a white man from an angry mob who thought he supported the racist Ku Klux Klan. It was an act of extraordinary courage and kindness - and is still inspiring people today.**

Keshia Thomas was 18 when the Ku Klux Klan, the white supremacist organisation, held a rally in her home town in Michigan.

Liberal, progressive and multicultural, Ann Arbor was an unusual place for the KKK to choose, and hundreds of people gathered to show them they were not welcome. The atmosphere was tense, but controlled. Police dressed in riot gear and armed with tear gas protected a small group of Klansmen in white robes and conical hoods. Thomas was with a group of anti-KKK demonstrators on the other side of a specially-erected fence.

Then a woman with a megaphone shouted, "There's a Klansman in the crowd."

They turned around to see a white, middle-aged man wearing a Confederate flag T-shirt. He tried to walk away from them, but the protesters, including Thomas, followed, "just to chase him out".

It was unclear whether the man was a Ku Klux Klan supporter, but to the anti-KKK protesters, his clothes and tattoos represented exactly what they had come to resist. The Confederate flag he wore was for them a symbol of hatred and racism, while the SS tattoo on his arm pointed to a belief in white supremacy, or worse.

There were shouts of "Kill the Nazi" and the man began to run - but he was knocked to the ground. A group surrounded him, kicking him and hitting him with the wooden sticks of their placards.

Mob mentality had taken over. "It became barbaric," says Thomas.

"When people are in a crowd they are more likely to do things they would never do as an individual. Someone had to step out of the pack and say, 'This isn't right.'"

So the teenager, then still at high school, threw herself on top of a man she did not know and shielded him from the blows.

"When they dropped him to the ground, it felt like two angels had lifted my body up and laid me down."

For Mark Brunner, a student photographer who witnessed the episode, it was who she saved that made Thomas' actions so remarkable.

"She put herself at physical risk to protect someone who, in my opinion, would not have done the same for her," he says. "Who does that in this world?"

So what gave Thomas the impetus to help a man whose views it appeared were so different from her own? Her religious beliefs played a part. But her own experience of violence was a factor, too.

"I knew what it was like to be hurt," she says. "The many times that that happened, I wish someone would have stood up for me."

The circumstances - which she does not want to describe - were different. "But violence is violence - nobody deserves to be hurt, especially not for an idea."

Thomas has never heard from the man she saved, but she did once meet a member of his family. Months later, someone came up to her in a coffee shop and said thanks.

"What for?" she asked. "That was my dad," the young man replied.

For Thomas, the fact that the man had a son gave her actions even greater significance - she had potentially prevented further violence.

"For the most part, people who hurt... they come from hurt. It is a cycle. Let's say they had killed him or hurt him really bad. How does the son feel? Does he carry on the violence?"

Teri Gunderson, who was bringing up her two adopted mixed-race daughters in Iowa at the time, was so touched by Thomas' story that she kept a copy of her picture - and still looks at it 17 years later. Gunderson even thinks the student made her a better person.

"The voice in my head says something like this, 'If she could protect a man [like that], I can show kindness to this person.' And with that encouragement, I do act with more kindness. I don't know her, but since then I am more kind."

But she asks herself whether she could be as brave as Thomas. What if one of the hurtful people who had racially abused her girls was in danger, she wonders. "Would I save them, or would I stand there and say, 'You deserved it, you were a jerk.' I just don't know the answer to that, yet. Maybe that is why I am so struck by her."

Brunner and Gunderson both often think of the teenager's actions. But Thomas, now in her 30s and living in Houston, Texas, does not. She prefers to concentrate on what more she can do in future, rather than what she has achieved in the past.

"I don't want to think that this is the best I could ever be. In life you are always striving to do better."

Thomas says she tries to do something to break down racial stereotypes every day. No grand gestures - she thinks that small, regular acts of kindness are more important.

"The biggest thing you can do is just be kind to another human being. It can come down to eye contact, or a smile. It doesn't have to be a huge monumental act."

Looking back at his photos of Thomas pushing back the mob that day in June 1996, Brunner says: "We would all like to be a bit like Keshia, wouldn't we? She didn't think about herself. She just did the right thing."