Sunday, May 1, 1983

"A NEW COMMANDMENT"

John 13:31-35

If someone asked you to sum up the basic message of the Christian faith in as few words as possible, what would you say? However you stated your answer, it would have to include the word "love." Perhaps you would say simply, "God loves you! God forgives you! God accepts you!" Someone once asked the German theologian Karl Barth how he would sum up all he had written in the field of Christian theology, which was more than a shelf filled with books, and he said simply, "Jesus loves me; this I know, for the Bible tells me so!"

At the center of the Christian faith is love. We proclaim that Jesus Christ is God's love revealed most uniquely in a human being. "The love of God became flesh and dwelt among us."

Jesus himself used the word love to sum up what he knew and believed. When someone asked him which of the 10 commandments was the most important, he didn't choose any one of them, but rather said, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and soul and mind and strength, and you shall love your neighbor as yourself."

And in our scripture reading for this morning, as Jesus was preparing his closest followers for his coming death and resurrection and the fact that he would no longer be with them as he had been, he said, "A new commandment I give you: that you love one another; even as I have loved you, that you also love one another. By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another."

We who call ourselves Christians are not only to love our neighbors and our enemies in the world, but we are to love one another within our own Christian family. Now that sounds obvious enough, but it doesn't necessarily and automatically happen. Love doesn't even automatically happen in our human biological families. All of us know that some of the worst disputes and conflicts can be found within families and within church congregations.

A ministerial colleague of mine likes to tell this true story of a family feud. There were twin brothers who lived in an Indiana town. They were inseparable; not only did they look alike, but thought alike, dressed alike, went to the same schools, did the same things. When their father died, they took over his business, a general store.

One morning a customer came into the store and made a small purchase. The brother who waited on him put the dollar bill on top of the cash register and walked to the front of the store with the man. Some time later he remembered what he had done, but when he went to the cash register, he found the dollar gone. He aksed his twin brother if he had seen the bill. The brother replied that he knew nothing about it. "That's funny," said the other. "I distinctly remember placing the bill on the cash register, and no one has been in the store since."

Had the matter been dropped at that point, a puzzle over what happened to a single dollar bill, nothing would have come of it. However, an hour later, this time with a noticeable hint of suspicion in his voice, the brother asked again, "Are you sure you didn't see that dollar bill and put it into the register?" The other brother was quick to catch the note of distrust and flared back in defensive anger.

This was the beginning of what led to a serious breach of trust between the two. It grew wider and wider. Each time they tried to discuss it, new charges and countercharges got mixed into the brew, until finally things got so bad they were forced to dissolve their partnership. They actually ran a partition right down the middle of their father's store and turned what had once been a harmonious partnership into the occasion of angry competition. In fact, that business became a source of division in the whole community, each twin trying to enlist allies for himself against the other. This open warfare went on for more than 20 years.

Then one day a car with an out-of-state license pulled up at the store. Out stepped a well dressed man, who then went into one of the sides of the store and inquired how long the merchant had been doing business there. When he learned that it was over 20 years, the stranger said, "Then you are the one with whom I must settle an old score."

He explained that 20 years earlier, he had been out of work, drifting from place to place. He happened to get off a railroad boxcar in this town, without a penny in his pocket. He had not eaten for three days. As he was walking down the alley behind the store, he looked in through an open door and saw a dollar bill lying on the cash register. No one was near the counter, so he did something he had not done before. He stole that dollar bill off the register and left without being seen. He was now back to pay what was owed, plus whatever damages his theft had caused in the intervening years.

At that point, the stranger was surprised to see the old man standing in front of him shake his head in dismay and begin to weep. When he pulled himself together, he took the stranger by the arm and said, "I want you to go next door and repeat the same story you just told me." The stranger did so, only this time there were two old men, who looked remarkably alike, both weeping.

To think -- 20 years of hostility and recrimination and broken relationships! And it all rooted back to a spirit of mistrust that came to exist between them, a mistrust which tragically enough was now revealed to have no basis in reality at all.

Isn't it true that what often attacks and destroys love between us human beings is a deep-seated mistrust and suspicion? And then that suspicion and mistrust grows and grows until finally it's almost impossible to heal.

Jesus knew this could happen, even among those who were his closest followers. So he said, "A new commandment I give to you: that you love one another; even as I have loved you, that you also love one another. By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another."

Jesus knew that we human beings, even his closest followers, are inclined to be suspicious of each other. And the only thing that can overcome this suspicion is the commandment to love, which means to trust each other.

Suspicion is most of the time related to our feelings and emotions, and Jesus is telling us not to give in

to these feelings too easily. And so we are commanded to love one another. Can love be commanded? Perhaps not, if we think of love only as an emotion. But what if love is not an emotion? What if love is the way God acts toward the world and the way Jesus acted toward his disciples? "God so loved the world." And this love is not based on whether God can trust us or not. It's the way God acts toward us, regardless of our response and the way we are to act toward others, regardless of their response or our emotions or feelings. This kind of love moves us beyond feeling and emotion into speaking and doing for one another.

Now we can understand why St. Paul, in writing of love in I Corinthians 13, said, "Love is patient and kind; love is not jealous or boastful; it is not arrogant or rude. Love does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice at wrong, but rejoices in the right. Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things."

Again the point is underscored: the commandment to love transcends our emotions. How do we do this? St. Paul said, "Love believes all things."

When it comes to believing, there are three styles of people. On one side is the gullible person who believe almost everything. What such a person believes depends on who gets to him or her first, or perhaps who gets to him or her last. Such a one believes television commercials and sends money for every new gadget advertised during the breaks. Such a one believes the gossip of the sensational newspapers that can be bought at the supermarket. We call such people -- gullible.

At the other extreme is the cynic, who believes almost nothing. He or she likes to be thought of as a realist and begins with the assumption that everyone is to be distrusted. People are never neighbors, only competitors. Such people think of all politicians as bad, all newspapers as being parties to mass deception. The cynic of this type believes only one thing: nobody can be trusted.

Somewhere in between these two extremes is another kind of believer. It is the person who is basically trustful of others, although he or she realizes that some people will betray that trust.

So, there is a careless streak in love. It can be careless with goods, pouring expensive perfume on Jesus' feet and hair. A careful person would have measured it out before hand -- not too much (keeping some for one's self), not too little (ensuring that impression of generosity is given). Love is also careless with one's self. It is risky to put one's self out for another, to go out of one's way to help another person, when one is not sure of how to do it well. One may be misunderstood, deceived, hurt. We could end up looking ridiculous. Moved by love, however, we overpower our fear and take the risk.

Love is careless, too, with trust. Love is ready to believe. Love can throw off reserve. It does not worry too much about being cheated, because it has eyes for the other's needs. If love seems a little naive, it is not for lack of experience with other people, but because love does not bother to calculate the odds on people.

"Love one another, even as I have loved you." We are to love each other as Jesus loved. This means that we are to treat every person as having great worth. In some instances, the hard evidence of a person's behavior may make it difficult for us to see the worth. A person's record may suggest the line of argument to the effect that his or her death would improve the world. Yet love believes. Love believes that each individual is of supreme value, that the most corrupt dictator has a redeemable soul, that every killer on Death Row is a person of worth.

This does not mean that love turns its head away from the facts. Love looks the ugly, cruel facts straight in the face. Love looks at the liar and calls him a liar. Love looks at the sadistic dictator and calls him evil. Love does not excuse the rapist, the looter, or the corrupt politician. Love just sees more than the honest eye can see. Love sees beyond the facts and believes that that person is of inestimable worth, is redeemable, and can become good.

That's why love often goes against the grain of our desires and our emotions. There are some people whom we dislike too much to want to see redeemed. There are public figures whom we long to see put down and eliminated. There are people so obnoxious, in our view, that we cannot believe that they deserve to be

saved. So Jesus knew that at such times we have to be commanded to love. "A new commandment I give to you." Then we also have to remember that we are loved by God, no matter how mean or dishonest or wretched we may be or feel. This is the love which holds the universe together. It's the only love which can ultimately hold society together. In the long run, we are far better off trusting people too much than trusting too little. Besides, trusting people is training for trusting God. Amen.