Sunday, May 14, 1995
A MOTHER'S LOVE
John 13:31-35

As Jesus was nearing the end of His public ministry and after He and His disciples had eaten their last supper together on the Thursday night before His trial and crucifixion, Jesus gave His closest followers some instructions and advice.

The Gospel of John, known in the New Testament as the "Fourth Gospel," gives us a summary of what Jesus said to them on their last night together. It is found in chapters 13, 14, 15, 16, and 17.

Among all the things that Jesus said on this final evening, there is one statement that stands out. It is to be their overall guiding principle for the rest of their lives. He said it was a new commandment: "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 clear from other parts of Jesus' teaching that the command to love one another meant more than loving only those within your family or group. He even said in other places that we are to love our enemies.

Because Mother's Day was near, I immediately thought of my mother when I was studying this passage this past week. I thought to myself, "What better text could there be for a Mother's Day sermon?"

Unfortunately, my mother died suddenly almost 25 years ago in August 1970, and therefore it was not possible for her to have a last meal together with all the members of her family where she could have given us her final thoughts and hopes for us.

But if it had been possible, I wondered, what would she have said? Before I tell you what I think she would have said to me and my brother and sisters, I want you in your own mind to speculate what your mother would say to you now if she is still alive or what she would have said to you. What would her last words of advice be or have been? Then, if you are a parent, ask yourself now, what would you say to your children at a last meal together if you knew you were going to die the next day? What final advice would you give them? What guiding principle would you suggest as a foundation for their life?

I believe my mother would have said almost the same thing that Jesus said, although in her own words. It would have gone something like this: "There's one thing I want you to remember above all else after I die. Love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. Then everyone will know that you are my children if you have love for one another and practice unconditional love toward all people." This is also what my wife and I would say to our children at a last meal together.

Of course, all this advice about loving one another is easier said than done. It's easy to advocate love in general, but when you get specific, it's much more difficult. In another place, when Jesus said that we are to love God and to love our neighbor as ourselves, someone asked Him, "Who is my neighbor?" And when Jesus defined "neighbor" in the parable of the Good Samaritan as being someone you would never even think of associating with in any way, then some of His listeners were not so sure about loving their neighbors. It is not as easy as it sounds. It all depends on your definition of neighbor.

Furthermore, loving other people, even those you normally associate with day in and day out, in very specific ways, is not as easy as it sounds.

A little over a year ago, an article in USA Today prescribed an interesting course of treatment for medical professionals.

In order to help patients feel better about their doctors and doctors feel better about their patients, some analysts suggested acting lessons.

As accomplished actors and actresses, physicians who find themselves too busy, too stressed, and too suspicious to really feel compassion for their patients can at least act like they care. The ultimate goal of these acting lessons is the hope that by teaching doctors to respond as if they are emotionally connected to their patients, they may come to genuinely feel the compassion and care they have been acting out.

This suggestion is not as silly as it seems. I have long believed that it is easier to act yourself into a new way of thinking than to think yourself into a new way of acting.

It's what I called in a sermon years ago, "The Power of Positive Acting." The most effective teachers and leaders throughout history have known about and used the power of positive acting. They realized that an idea, commitment, or feeling amounts to very little until one begins to act on it. Jesus practiced and encouraged the power of positive acting. He advised His disciples not to trust their feelings but to act in loving ways toward others.

After constantly dealing with needy, hurting people, all members of the "helping professions" tend to build up a protective layer that helps them distance themselves from their patients, clients, or parishioners. Sometimes we are so drained that the best we can do is mechanically go through the paces. It's at that point we've got to start acting.

And that's okay. When people who have just performed some heroic, life-threatening deed to save another are asked how they "felt" about what they were doing while they were doing it, the reply is usually "nothing."

Here's a stranger who helped pull three children out of a burning house: "I didn't even think about it. It was happening so fast, and I knew we had to get them out of there." Here's a mother who lifts a tree off her son's leg: "I didn't even feel how heavy it was — until I put it down." When love and compassion for another take over completely, they are expressed through actions, not feelings. You cannot gradually and cautiously feel your way toward a loving action. Love is action. Genuine love always leaps before it looks. God's love for us is above all love in action.

God so loved the world and us that God acted. God came and lived among us in the person of Jesus.

I believe this is the kind of love we celebrate on Mother's Day. Love in action is the force behind all those meals Mom prepared; all those chauffeured trips to soccer, baseball, ballet, and piano lessons; all those good-night books read to sleepy children by a tired mom; all those long walks and talks, and all those other things that were done by a mom who juggled both a career and an active, energetic home life. And mothers do all these things many times when they don't particularly feel like doing them.

Most of us, if our mothers are still alive, reflect a tiny bit of that action-packed love back to our mothers on this day. Someone told me that Mother's Day is the second busiest day of the year for telephone companies (only Christmas day tops it). It is also one of the busiest days of the year for florists. It is the fourth biggest day for greeting card companies. Most people want to show how much they care by doing something.

A mother's love and the love we hopefully reflect back, especially on this Mother's Day, are in the deepest sense examples of God's love. God's love for us and our human love for one another are all of one piece. They cannot be separated. The first letter of John in the New Testament says this over and over again.

Here are a few examples from the first letter of John: "Little children, let us love, not in word or speech, but in truth and action.... Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God; everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love. God's love was revealed among us in this way: God sent His only Son into the world so that we might live through Him. In this is love, not that we loved God, but that God loved us and sent the Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins. Beloved, since God loved us so much, we also ought to love one another. No one has ever seen God; if we love one another, God lives in us and God's love is perfected in us.... Those who say, 'I love God' and hate any other human being are liars; those who do not love others whom they have seen cannot love God whom they have not seen."

We cannot love God or another person "in general" or in the abstract. Love always has to be made specific. Love is more than a feeling. It is more than an idea, concept, or nice thought. It is not actually love until it is expressed in action. Love is a verb more than it is a noun.

In the book First Things First by Stephen Covey and Roger and Rebecca Merrill, there's a story about a business consultant friend named Fred who was moving into a new house. He decided to hire a friend to landscape the grounds. This friend had a doctorate in horticulture and was extremely bright and knowledgeable.

Fred had a wonderful vision for the lawn and garden, but because he was very busy and traveled a lot, he kept emphasizing to his friend the need to create his lawn and garden in a way that would require little or no maintenance on his part. He said automatic sprinklers were an absolute necessity; he was always on the lookout for labor-saving devices and any other ways to save time and labor.

Finally, his friend said, "Fred, I can see what you're saying, but there's one thing you need to deal with before we go any further. If there's no gardener, there's no garden."

In our life with one another, there's no love unless there are people who practice love in action toward one another.

I've made two points thus far. Love is more than feeling — it is doing good things for another even when we don't feel like it and even when we might not especially feel close to someone.

And the second point, love of one another and the love of God are all of one piece. They cannot be separated.

A mother's love is a reflection and a part of God's love. One good way to honor our mothers and our mother's love is to spread that love to other people, many of whom will be far beyond the members of our immediate families. And that's exactly what Jesus was asking His followers to do: love others in the same way that I have loved you.

And the third point I want to make is this: We love and honor our mothers because they are the ones who have given us the gift of life itself. This kind of love and honoring has nothing to do with whether or not we think our mother is or was an outstanding mother or not so outstanding. It has nothing to do with what we think our mother deserves or doesn't deserve. It has nothing to do with whether or not we agree with her all the time or think that she has meddled in our lives too much. It is an act of respect, an act of recognizing that our own life is a gift — a gift from our mother and a gift from God. Amen.