

Jesus' Dying Wish
The Monroe Congregational Church
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John 13: 1-17, 31-35

If you knew you were about to die, what would you tell the people you love? What hope or dream would you share? What last, urgent piece of advice would you offer?

That's the headspace I imagine Jesus to be in in today's reading. He knows what's coming, maybe not all the details, but he knows that as the night progresses, he will be in increasing danger. Judas has already left the Last Supper to carry out his betrayal. The crucifixion clock is ticking fast and hard, and Jesus knows that his disciples are about to face the greatest loss they've ever known.

So, he gets right down to business. No parables, no stories, no pithy sayings. Just a basin, and a towel, and some warm soapy water. One simple, straightforward action, displaying Jesus's deepest desire for his followers: *"Love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another."*

As we've already pondered, a great way of showing someone you love how much they mean to you is to care for them and bring them comfort. And I'm sure that in washing off the dust from the road there was relief.

And then, right on the heels (get it?) of this loving action, a promise. Or maybe an incentive. Or perhaps a warning: *"By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another."*

May I take a moment here to point out what Jesus doesn't say? When death comes knocking, and the Son of God has hours left to communicate the heart of his message one more time so his followers will get it right once he's gone, he doesn't say, *"Believe the right things."*

He doesn't say, *"Maintain personal and doctrinal purity."*

He doesn't say, *"Worship like this or attend a church like that."*

He doesn't even say, *"Read your Bible,"* or *"Pray every day."*

After he washes their feet, he simply says, *"Love one another."*

That's it. It's the last dream of a dead man walking. All of Christianity distilled down to its essence so that maybe we'll pause long enough to hear it in three simple words: *Love one another.*

What's staggering to me is how badly we've managed to botch it over the last two thousand years. Wars, famine, violence, bigotry.

When I look at my life, I often fail to obey Jesus's dying wish. To love means you must be vulnerable, and I'd rather not be most days. Love requires trust, and I'm naturally suspicious. Love takes time, effort, discipline, and transformation, and I am just so darned busy. Maybe you are too.

Shaped as we are by the entertainment industry, we usually think of love as spontaneous and free-flowing. We fall in love. Love is blind, it happens at first sight, it breaks our hearts, love it conquers all, and (*most ridiculous of all if you ask me*) love means never having to say you're sorry.

Even when we put our cultural clichés aside, we know that authentic love can't be manipulated, simulated, or rushed. Those of us who have younger kids or grandkids understand that commanding them to love each other never works! The most we can do is insist that they behave as if they love each other: "*Share your toys.*" "*Say sorry.*" "*Don't hit.*" "*Use kind words.*" But these actions — often performed with gritted teeth and rolling eyes — isn't quite what Jesus is talking about.

Jesus doesn't say, "*Act as if you love.*" He doesn't give his disciples (or us) the easy "*out*" of doing nice things with clenched hearts. He says, "*Love as I have loved you.*" As in, for real. As in, the whole bona fide package. Authentic feeling, deep engagement, generous action.

Doesn't it sound like he's asking for the impossible?

Imagine what would happen to us, to the Church, to the world, if we took this commandment of Jesus's seriously? What could Christendom look like if we cultivated "*impossible*" love?

I ask these questions with a little fear and trepidation, because I don't know how to answer them, even for myself.

I know fairly well how to do things that are loving.

I know how to make care packages for the homeless I encounter when driving around doing errands.

I know how to bake a tray of brownies to share with my church friends at coffee hour.

I know how to write and send a check to charities that are doing really good and important work, like those engaged in meeting humanitarian needs in Ukraine.

But do I know how to love as Jesus loved? To feel a depth of compassion that's gut-punching? To experience a hunger for justice so fierce and urgent that I rearrange my life in order to pursue it? Do I know how to empathize until my heart breaks? Maybe. Some days. But do I want to, like, every single day?

Most of the time (I'll be honest) I don't. I want to be safe. I want to keep my personal circle small and manageable. And I want to choose the people I love based on my own affinities, not on Jesus's all-inclusive commandment. Charitable actions are easy. But cultivating my heart? Preparing and pruning it to love, especially those that make it really hard sometimes? Becoming vulnerable in authentic ways to the world's pain? Those things are hard. And costly.

And yet... and yet. This was Jesus's dying wish. Which means that we have a God who first and foremost wants every one of his children to feel loved. Not shamed. Not punished. Not chastised. Not judged. Not isolated or erased... But loved.

But that's not all. Jesus follows his commandment with an exhilarating and terrifying promise: "*By this everyone will know...*" Meaning, love is the litmus test of Christian witness.

Our love for each other is how the world will know who we are and whose we are. Our love for each other is how the world will see, taste, touch, hear, and find Christ. It's through our love that we will embody Jesus in a broken and dying world.

I can't speak for you, but the responsibility of all of it sometimes makes me tremble.

Because if we fail to love one another, the world may not know what it needs to know about God, and in the terrible absence of that knowing, it will believe falsehoods that break God's heart...

Like that there really is no transformative power in the resurrection.

Or that God is a mean, angry, vindictive parent, determined only to shame and punish us so we better shape up.

Or that the universe is a cold, meaningless place, ungoverned by love.

Or that the Church is only a flawed and hypocritical institution — and not Christ's living, breathing, healing body on earth.

Such is the power we wield in our decisions to love or not love, to pick up that towel and dunk it in the water... or not. This is the responsibility we shoulder, whether we want to some days or not.

But here's our saving grace: Jesus doesn't leave us alone and bereft. We are not direction-less in this wilderness. He gives us a road map, a clear and beautiful way forward: "*As I have loved you.*" Follow my example, he says...

Do what I do.
Love as I love.
Live as you have seen me live.

Weep with those who weep.
Laugh with those who laugh.
Touch the untouchables.

Feed the hungry.
Welcome the children.
Release the captive.
Forgive the sinner.

Confront the oppressor.
Comfort the oppressed.
Wash each other's feet.

Hold each other close.
Tell each other the truth.
Guide each other home.

In other words, Jesus's dying wish for us is that we're invited to abide in the holy place where all love originates. We can make our home in Jesus's love — the most abundant and inexhaustible love in existence.

Our love is not our own; it is God's, and God our source is without limit, without end. There are no parched places God will not drench with water if we but ask.

"Love one another as I have loved you." For our own sakes.
And for the world's. Amen.