

Date: Sunday May 2, 2010

Scripture: John 13: 31-35

Title: “The Sign Says”

The Message of Scripture (Sermon Thesis): A new commandment, love one another.

The Sharing of the Good News (The Sermon Purpose): Sharing Christ’s love in the world.

(Remember, it’s all about God!)

The comedian, Bill Engvall, hit it big a few years ago with his comedy routine entitled, “Here’s your sign.” You’re probably familiar with this act. He shares examples of obvious or redundant questions that get asked and his point is that when someone else asks such questions, they get a sign for being foolish. A couple of examples that he shares: He pulls a stringer of fish out of his boat and someone asks, “Did you catch those fishing?” he replies, “No, I was out in my boat and talked them in to giving up. Here’s your sign.” Or, he pulls into a gas station after a tire goes flat and the employee asks, “Did your tire go flat on you?” He replies, “No, these other tires just swelled up. Here’s your sign.” There are many more examples. I’m sure we all have some of our own. Plus, we would all probably wear that sign once in awhile.

Reverend William Willimon writes about a different kind of sign. He was driving through South Carolina and passed by a church that had a big sign out front. He likes reading church signs. So do I. There was another pastor I read about a few years ago who took his sabbatical, drove around the country, and photographed church signs and then took the pictures and made a book. Signs like, “Where

are you sitting for eternity – smoking or non smoking.” Or “Pray, especially on days that end in ‘Y.’” Anyway, this particular sign that Reverend Willimon saw, read, “Repent! Now is the day of salvation.” A mile or so down the road was a church of a different denomination and it had a sign that read, “Happy Mother’s Day. Virtues are learned at Mother’s knee and vices at some other joint.” Mother’s Day is next Sunday so there’s a nice Mother’s Day thought. Then, almost right next door to the church that had the Mother’s Day saying was another church with a big sign that read, “Garage Sale next Saturday. Cheap prices and great deals.” Reverend Willimon began to wonder, “What does the world, that knows little about Christianity except for perhaps seeing church signs, think about Christian faith?” Then he saw one more sign. It read, “We’ve got room for you at the table. Hospitality practiced here. Everyone is welcome.” Now that’s a good sign and an even better message Reverend Willimon thought to himself. Then he realized, that last sign was in front of the Happy Hamburger Restaurant and not in front of a church.

A few days later, still in South Carolina, Reverend Willimon and a friend walk into another restaurant. Nothing but pickup trucks parked out front. At nearly every table were working people, almost all of them in ball caps, talking and eating lunch. Almost every table was divided equally with black folks and white folks. There was laughter and conversation. Surveying this setting, the friend said, “I think we have walked into the kingdom of God.” In a racially divided America, imagine that a racially inclusive diner offers a word of hope. While the church

hour is still one of the most segregated places in our country, a local diner gives us a glimpse of how church might be – a gathering convened by God where we are forced to be in conversation with those whom we might have avoided had God not brought us together. What should that restaurant's sign be?

Now to be sure, the Kingdom of God is more than a bunch of diverse folks having a meal together. But Christians can know that while sharing a meal and discussing difficult subjects might not be the completeness of the Kingdom of God, it could very well be the beginning (Willimon). That's what we do here on Sundays like today. We enact and celebrate salvation in the name of Jesus Christ, with a meal called the Lord's Supper. We come to this table with folks who are different from us; maybe some that we like less than others, and we hold out our hands, we share in the elements of this table blessed by the Holy Spirit, and together we obey a command from Jesus – do this in remembrance of me.

Well, our gospel lesson today is about another commandment from Jesus, another commandment that helps us to be more about the kingdom of God, and it, too, is a commandment that we live out together at this very table. It is considered a “new” commandment, but it comes at an odd time. Here's what I mean.

We are in the midst of the Easter Season, that time of new life following the brutality of death on a cross and the glory of resurrection. It seems rather odd that in the midst of this time of new life, we are talking about and remembering a conversation that Jesus had with his disciples in the days before he died. But the irony of today's passage should not be lost. Immediately preceding today's passage

is Jesus' prediction of Judas' betrayal against him and immediately after today's passage is Jesus' prediction of Peter's denial of him. At the darkest moment, when anticipation of human failure seems certain because colleagues are conspiring to undermine their leader, the announcement is made of Jesus' glorification. The moment of Jesus' exaltation, honor, and praise, is set against the backdrop of betrayal and denial. From this moment comes forth a new commandment and anything new belongs in the Easter Season.

But just what is this new commandment? Jesus says to "Love one another" (John, 13:34). I'll say that again, Jesus says to love one another. But is that really new? Haven't we been told to love one another before? In Leviticus 19:18 it states ". . . you shall love your neighbor as yourself: I am the Lord." In Matthew 22, Jesus is repeating those words as he responds to a question posed by the Pharisees when he says, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself" (39). There are other examples where we are told to love. So how can this be considered a new commandment?

Well, according to Theologian Charles Cousar there are two ways. First, Jesus is offering a new and unparalleled model of love for the disciples. In Jesus, the disciples have a concrete, living, expression of what love is. Love can no longer be trivialized or reduced to an emotion or debated over as if it were a philosophical virtue that is under scrutiny. Jesus himself becomes the distinctive definition of love.

Second, the love that Jesus commands in this passage inaugurates a new era. While many want to continually speak of what has transpired in the past and what

is hoped for in the future, the present moment is the decisive one. Jesus opens up a new and different situation in which the life of the age to come, in other words eternal life, is no longer only to be awaited as a future event but is instead the life of this very moment. Jesus is establishing a new community, the intimate although at times unfaithful family that he calls “little children” in today’s passage (John 13:33). What holds this community together and makes it stand out above all else is the love the members have for one another – dramatic, persistent love, like the love that Jesus has had for them. Jesus is making love the distinguishing mark of his community (Cousar). And of course today we know this community as “church.” So Jesus is telling us, the people of the church, to love one another.

The question for today becomes, why is this love that Jesus commands important? Well, think about it. In a world that has political extremists on the right and left screaming at one another; in a world where a state in this nation is reviving and reusing the chilling phrase and the practice of “show me your papers”; in a world where certain financial institutions that are to be securing and generating wealth are instead defrauding the public, love is needed. There is a tremendous void in the world right now just waiting to be filled by the love and guidance that comes forth from the church. The church is the body of Christ. We are called to share the love of Christ and the world needs the love of Christ as much now as ever. But we cannot do that if we don’t have love within our own Christian community. So we follow the command of Jesus, “. . . love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another” (34). It’s that clear.

This all brings me back to the topic of signs. Whatever we do, whoever we are as a faith community, we should be prepared to declare that on our sign. If we don't have any particular beliefs, our sign can be blank. If we have an important church event occurring, like Food 4 Kids, we can share that information on our sign. Like the Happy Hamburger, if we have room for all, we can indicate that on our sign. But as a faith community, called to follow the way of Christ, it's important that we are articulate with our sign. Who knows what our church sign says right now? (It reads, "Believing is Seeing; Jesus Lives; Celebrate Here). But before today is over, it will read, "Love One Another," just those three words, "Love One Another." We do this, if for no other reason, because we are commanded. But most of all, we do so because the world needs the love of Christ. And the love of Christ in the world has been, is, and will be very good news. In just a moment, we will practice that love together at this table, but right now let us pray.

Lord,

We hear your call to love one another. It sounds so easy. But we know it can be a challenge. Show us the way. Make us into an example of your love in a world that desperately needs to know your love. We are ready. This we pray. Amen.

Offering: This is the time we offer our gifts, whatever we can give, as we answer

God's call to love. The ushers will please . . .

Dedication: Lord, we ask that you accept and bless what we offer. We dedicate ourselves and our gifts to the world that you make. We pray in Jesus name, Amen.

Benediction: Blessed, loved, and renewed. We now go out into the world in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. The world needs us. Go forth.

Amen and Amen.

Sources:

Cousar, Charles.; Gaventa, Beverly.; McCann, J. Clinton; Newsome, James; "Texts for Preaching – A Lectionary Commentary Based on the NRSV – Year C"; Westminster John Knox Press: Louisville, KY; 1994.

Holy Bible – New Revised Standard Version; Harper Bibles: San Francisco; 2007.

Willimon, William; Pulpit Resource; Logos Productions: Inver Grove Heights, MN; 2008.