

"Glue for a Fractured World"

Psalm 145:13b-19; John 13:31-35

Highlands Presbyterian Church, Columbus

June 25, 2017 – 3rd Sunday after Pentecost – Rev. Ronald Botts

"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..."

The words were no doubt chosen carefully. Jesus knew exactly what he wanted to say. "I give you a new commandment." Not "here's a good suggestion" or "a bit of advice" or "words to consider."

A commandment is a mandate. It's not something that is intended to be an option, something that we can take or leave, something that we can do or ignore as we see fit. A commandment is obligatory and binding. There is nothing here or elsewhere to show that Jesus didn't mean what he said.

But how can we be commanded to love? Can we turn love on and off? You either have feelings for another or not. You're attracted to some people, but not to others. Surely Jesus must have known that you can't fall in love with everybody. Unless, of course, that's not what he had in mind.

Romantic attraction is one kind of love, but clearly that's not how it is meant here. The intent of this "commandment" is best understood by words like caring and concern. It signifies a right relationship between people, a constructive spirit that extends from one individual to another, a matter of giving rather than only receiving. The type of love that Jesus intends here is not primarily emotional, yet it has force and power just the same.

Today I want to share with you an example of love that is filled with transforming energy. It's found in a story about Fr. Elias Chacour. Fr. Elias was assigned to the small village of Ibillin in Northern Israel. We naturally connect Israel with the Jewish faith, but many of its residents are Christian as well.

When Fr. Elias was first sent to that town many years ago there was no community center or library. Even the church was falling down. Its walls were full of cracks and fissures, just like the splits that ran through the congregation itself. The divisions in the parish were evidenced by how the people sat in church on Sunday. There were four distinct groups, each staying at a distance from the others. The only thing they seemed to have in common was that every face appeared grim and weary.

Fr. Elias soon learned the fractures had to do with four brothers who had a long history of animosity. Even the death of their mother failed to bring these sons together. They and their families sat apart at her funeral in the same way they did at all other times of worship.

On Palm Sunday in his first year Fr. Elias looked down at the stony faces that sat before him. It was a scene that he was used to seeing. Hymns were sung in the service, but without any

spirit. The Scriptures were read, the homily preached, the Eucharist shared, but the congregation just seemed to go through the motions and without any joy.

Perhaps it was because this was the beginning of Holy Week, or maybe he was just frustrated with the lack of response from the people, but before the service ended Fr. Elias did something he had not planned nor would anyone have anticipated. It certainly got everyone's attention.

In the middle of the service Fr. Elias suddenly walked to the back of the church and locked the doors. Returning to the chancel he looked directly at his parishioners and said: "Sitting in this building does not make you a Christian. You are a people divided. You argue and hate each other. If you can't love your brother whom you see, how can you say that you love God who is invisible? You have allowed the Body of Christ to be disgraced.

"I have tried for months to unite you. I have failed. I am only a man. But there is someone else who can bring you together in true unity. His name is Jesus. He has the power to forgive you. So now I will be quiet and allow him to give you that power. If you will not forgive, then we stay locked in here. If you want, you can kill each other, and I'll provide your funeral gratis."

Ten minutes passed. People stirred uneasily as you might imagine, but no one moved. For Fr. Elias it seemed like an hour. At last the brother sitting in the front pew stood up. He turned and faced the congregation, his eyes looking from brother to brother, from group to group. Fr. Elias thought "What now?" Would he curse or challenge the others? Would this be the start of a melee right there in the sanctuary? Everyone waited for the man's words with trepidation, the priest included. Finally he spoke.

"I... I'm sorry. I am the worst of all. I have hated my own brothers. I have hated them so much that I wanted to kill them. More than any of you, I need forgiveness." Turning to the priest he asked, "Father, can you forgive me?"

"Come here," Fr. Elias replied. The pastor put his arms around the man, then said, "Now go and greet your brothers." At that moment the four brothers came together in the middle aisle and, amidst tears, each forgiving the other. Soon all the rest made their way to the center aisle and began to embrace. Long pent up emotions of regret began to be expressed freely. Relatives and friends who had hardly spoken for years now began to talk and cry.

Fr. Elias finally shouted over the din of this joyous reunion, "Dear friends, we are not going to wait until next week to celebrate the resurrection. Let us begin it now. We were dead to each other. Now we are alive." And unlocking the doors, the parishioners spilled quickly out into the village streets.

For the rest of the day, and well into the evening, the people of the church went from house to house in the town. At every door they asked forgiveness for wrongs they had done in the past and, on that day, grace was everywhere given.

Today that congregation in Ibillin is thriving. They have built a regional high school, opened a community center, and established a library. In the latter there is a sign that proclaims: "God is the creator of all human beings, with their differences, their colors, their races. Every time

you draw near to your neighbor, you draw nearer to God. Every time you go further from your neighbor, you go further from God.”

Now I like to hear a positive story like this one and maybe you do, too. It lifts up unexpected possibilities even within improbable situations. We need assurance that radical change can take place, even against the odds.

Today I believe we are in a situation not unlike the ruptures of that small village. Our divisions are in the neighborhood and in the city, in the nation and in the world. Brother seems to be set against brother, sister against sister. Incendiary speech and violence is becoming an accepted way of life. Ridicule and character assassination is prevalent on social media. Humanity seems fragmented almost everywhere we turn.

Sometimes I find that I don't want to watch TV or pick up a newspaper or listen to the strident talk that is so common. People appear to be unable to discuss issues with even a modicum of civility, much less commit themselves to the challenging work of coming together on the many problems that beset us.

We're very polarized today and very separated. To listen to some, all our difficulties can be attributed to the Hispanics or Blacks, native born or immigrants, Democrats or Republicans, the very rich or the very poor. Interestingly, people are never themselves in any of the groupings they condemn. It's always “those people” who are at fault.

Even in the midst of all these prevailing and looming problems there is a glimmer. To such a world and time as ours Jesus still speaks and what he says to us is this: "I give you a new commandment, that you love one another [just as I have loved you] so that everyone will know you are my disciples."

Christ could not be any clearer. He leaves us with no ambiguity. He may not lay out the specifics of how all this might work, but he provides a vision and gives us a charge.

What Jesus calls for is a kind of love that speaks directly to the heart of men and women. It starts within and then moves outward to our family and friends, and extends to neighbors and colleagues in the workplace.

True love and caring ought to be a hallmark of a congregation like ours. It needs to move from within our walls to the faith family next to us and to the church across the street. It may start within but then it has to move outward, past the walls that constrict us and through the doors which lock us in place, until it finds its way into the streets and communities where we live and work.

The world typically looks to ultimatums, to armaments, to troops on the ground as the means to achieve stability; yet none of these are truly effective except perhaps as brief control measures. Ultimately they prove to be a failure in bringing peace. The best they offer is a temporary absence of open conflict. Alan Watts, writing in *The Wisdom of Insecurity*, reminds us that “we have no way of saving ourselves.” But there is a way, and Christ shows it to us.

Who will then lead in breaking down barriers between people? Our politicians? Who will show humanity a different model of what it means to live in harmony? Our corporate CEOs? No, it

won't be found where the world commonly thinks, but rather it has to be lived out by people who are truly committed through a life-changing faith. It will be folks just like you, and you, and you, and me. It will be those of us who take the commandment of Jesus to heart when he says to love one another, as he loves us... fully and unconditionally.

Love and forgiveness are qualities that we build up and hone right here within our church, but they're also the powerful means we take out to transform and reshape the world | as we join others who are likewise committed. When we love as we have been loved, then we truly live as Christ's disciples, and that love is the greatest force the world can ever know. It is the glue that holds together an often fractured world.