

Famous for What

John 13:31-35

When the kids were younger they would often ask us to tell what they called “bad stories.” I don’t remember now where that term came from, but what they wanted to hear were stories about when we were kids and misbehaved, and then got in trouble for it. Jim had lots of those kinds of stories to tell, and since I didn’t, I told them stories about all of the naughty things their Uncle Paul did when he was a kid. There were a lot of those.

It’s not that I was a perfect kid, I wasn’t. I gave my parents plenty to gnash their teeth over, but most of it was standard kid-drama. I was always certain – still am actually – that my brother, Paul, had a better deal going than I did. I was always being sent out to the yard to pull weeds while Paul got to go off to his friend Matt’s house to play: *It’s not fair!* I would wail, *I have to do all the work!* I would have to clean the kitchen after dinner – again – so Paul could go off and do his important junior high homework: *It’s his turn to do the dishes!* Or I would go out to play with Johanna, who lived across the street, which was fine unless Anne, who lived down the street, came over to play, too. Then the drama began: *I’m not going to be your friend anymore! If you don’t do it my way, I’m going home.*

It’s ironic, isn’t it, that when Jesus urges his disciples to be a different, distinctive, loving community he starts off by calling them ‘little children’? I’m sure he meant it as a term of endearment, but coexisting peaceably doesn’t come naturally to little children. For the first few years of their lives they are all about themselves: making sure that no one gets more than they do, or gets preferential treatment; carefully monitoring how fairly hugs and treats and rewards are doled out; seeing instantly if an injustice has been done to them in an imbalance of chores. They know exactly where they stand in the food chain, who is above them, and who is beneath them.

Maybe the reason he calls them little children is because we don’t always outgrow those tendencies to be self-absorbed. Even as adults, we still carefully monitor the fairness of things; we keep track of the benefits and privileges other people enjoy compared to those that come our way, we carry scorecards around with us, carefully documenting who has done what to us. Seem harsh? Well, let me ask you this: Ladies – do you still do more than your fair share of the housework, even if you are working outside of the home? Statistics and conversations I’ve had and heard say you do. Kids – does your brother or sister get better or fewer chores than you do? Has the thought ever crossed your mind, even fleetingly, that you lead Gateway or mow or host coffee hour or acolyte more than other people do? Is there someone who has made you so mad or hurt you so badly that you can’t bring yourself to talk to them? Have you ever felt so strongly about something that you would leave your club or committee or church if it didn’t go your way? And if it makes you feel any better, let me just say that I would have to say yes to each and every one of those things.

Jesus is calling them, us, to rise above that sort of behavior and to be a different kind of community. Not one based on self-preservation, or even fairness and kindness, but one based on love. *Love one another, as I have loved you. That’s how people will know that you are my disciples.*

Over the years here I've asked a lot of people what it was about Covenant that attracted them, and 98% of them have said that it was the welcome they got here. We are an amazingly friendly and welcoming congregation. But that wasn't what Jesus said we should be known for. He didn't say, "Be friendly to visitors. Make them feel welcome and at home. That's how people will know that you are my disciples." I'm not saying that we shouldn't be friendly and welcoming, but that Jesus would push us further. Be loving.

And, granted, that takes awhile for people to figure out. Friendly and welcoming are an appropriate first impression. Love comes later. You might first realize we are a loving congregation when you have to go to the hospital and people go out of their way to visit you or bring you food, or come to your house to help care for you when you come home. Or maybe if you lose your job or become caregiver to a sick parent, you'll see a caring and compassionate and generous side of a congregation come out, and you'll be cared for in ways you might never have been cared for before.

But you won't really know if a church is a loving church until there is a problem – not of the illness or loss sort, but the conflict sort; when there is a clash of wills or ideas or allegiances. And, believe me, Jesus was not so naïve as to think that a community based on love wouldn't have problems like that. Just because you love someone, or a whole congregation full of people, doesn't mean you will always agree with them or that things will always go smoothly. It doesn't mean that someone won't eventually step on your toes and say something really unkind or uncalled for. It doesn't mean that you will always see eye-to-eye on how the church's money should be spent or whether the youth should lead worship or what constitutes proper dress for church or what kind of hymns should be sung. All of that will still happen. The way you'll know if the church is a community based on love is how people behave when that happens.

Like most ministers, I'm often asked to read I Corinthians 13 at weddings, but what I always try to remind brides and grooms is that the love Paul talks about in it has nothing to do with a romantic, moony-eyed, newlywed, running-through-fields-of-flowers kind love. It really isn't relevant on your wedding day; it only becomes relevant about a month later when you have your very first fight, and wonder what on earth you were thinking of when you agreed to marry this man who can't remember to put the seat down and wants a man-cave so he can hang out with his uncouth friends. It's only relevant when you open your credit card bill and realize you have a huge difference of opinion about spending and saving. It doesn't become germane until those first hurtful words, and then you remember that it is about love in the trenches – love is patient, love is kind, love does not keep track of wrong-doings, it does not insist on its own way, it is not resentful.

When Jesus told his disciples to be a community that is known for its love for each other, love that is forgiving and patient and understanding and doesn't keep track of wrongs, he had just washed the disciples' feet, given them his body broken and his blood shed, and sent Judas off to go betray him to the authorities. And in a couple of minutes he would predict that Peter would deny knowing him in order to save his own hide. This wasn't any last day of camp kind of love that he was promoting in the church. It was a radical, profound, extreme kind of love that didn't seem to have any sense that enough was enough. That someone had ceased to deserve your love.

That you had done enough, and now it was their turn to shoulder some of the responsibility. That if someone hurt you badly enough, you could call it quits and go find some new friends or a new church. Or even that you could defend yourself against their unjust accusations. Jesus had spent three years of his life healing the sick and raising the dead and casting out demons, but the moment when he finally said that he was glorified, it was the moment that he failed to save his own life and allowed Judas to go out and have him arrested. It was the moment that his obedience to God and his love for his people was ultimately demonstrated – he chose love over self-preservation.

Imagine what living in a community characterized by that kind of love would be like. I'm seeing all kinds of books and journal articles that claim to have that silver bullet that will save the church. The key to getting and keeping new members is this new program or style of worship or technology or music; they will radicalize the church. But I'm thinking there's an even better, more basic way to save and grow and radicalize the church: What if we loved each other? What if we made this a place where the self-sacrificing love of Jesus was visible every day? It just might work.