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Epiphany Lutheran Church, Castle Rock, Colorado
Easter 5, Series C
Saturday, May 18th, 2019
Sunday, May 19th, 2019 (Confirmation Sunday)

Sermon: They'll Know We Are Christians by Our Love¹
Text: John 13:31-35

Focus: Christ Jesus demonstrated his love by dying for us on the cross.

Function: That they would love others in word and deed just as Christ loves them.

Structure: Text-Application

Locus: "I believe that Jesus Christ...has redeemed me, a lost and condemned person..." (SC, 2nd Article of the Creed).

Grace, mercy, and peace be unto you from the crucified and living Lord Jesus! Amen.

Today in our Gospel lesson Jesus speaks to us: "A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another: just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another. By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another" (John 13:34-35, ESV).²

Jesus' words remind me of a song from the 1960's. If you know it, join in with me:

*We are one in the Spirit.
We are one in the Lord.
We are one in the Spirit.
We are one in the Lord.
And we pray that our unity may one day be restored.
And they'll know we are Christians by our love, by our love.
Yeah, they'll know we are Christians by our love.*

The Christian writer Tertullian reports what the Romans said about the Christians in the second century—when Christianity was still an illegal "sect": "See how they *love* one another!"
See how they love one another.

¹ An earlier version of this message was preached on April 28th, 2013, at Epiphany Lutheran Church, Castle Rock, Colorado.

² All Scripture references, unless otherwise indicated, are from The Holy Bible, English Standard Version.

Love! Is that what we're known for today? Is that what people think of when they hear the word "Christian"? When they meet a follower of Jesus or visit a church, do they experience *love*? Do they really, truly know we are Christians by our love?

According to research by the Barna Group, the unfortunate answer is "NO!"³ Barna discovered that "outsiders" (unbelievers) ages 16-29 don't view the church as loving at all. Rather, Millennials and Gen Z regard Christianity as judgmental, hypocritical, anti-homosexual, old-fashioned, too political, out of touch with reality, insensitive to others, and—perhaps most damning of all—*boring*. These labels may seem harsh and unfair to us believers, but the Barna Group really did its homework. And in the 12 years since Barna conducted this research, the culture has only become more anti-Christian. Barna discovered what many of us already know: too many people have been hurt by those who claim the name of Christ. Instead of being loved and accepted by Jesus' disciples, many people have been stung, smited, and spited by believers. Whether it's from a pedophile priest, a bitter church split, judgmental hypocrites, or a church gossip, people both inside and outside of the Church hurt because of Christians.

Many years ago at another congregation, a young man came up to me after the Sunday morning worship service and asked, "Pastor, would I be accepted here?"

"Why wouldn't you be accepted?" I asked.

He rolled up his sleeves to reveal his tattooed arms and gestured to the body piercings in his ears and face. "Because of these," he said.

"Jesus was nailed to the cross," I answered, "so body piercing saved my life." (*Aside:* Yes, I know that's hokey, but I was trying to connect). "So yes, I hope you would be accepted

³ David Kinnaman and Gabe Lyons, *UnChristian: What a New Generation Really Thinks about Christianity...And Why It Matters* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2007).

here. Jesus loves all people, and so we love them too. I hope we have the chance to get to know you better so we can love you like Jesus does.”

That young man came back to church the following Sunday. He and his girlfriend sat nervously in the back pew, trying to follow along with the worship service while they juggled the hymnal and bulletin. But no one greeted them during the sharing of the peace. Nor did anyone pay attention to our guests and offer to help them navigate the service. Other than me (the pastor), I didn't see anyone else talk to them after the service or try to get to know them—and they never came back. Why not? I don't know for sure. Maybe they got busy. Maybe they didn't like my sermon. Or maybe nobody accepted them—no one *loved* them. In other words, we *did not* show that we are Christians by our love. And it's not just that congregation. Christians all around the world, including you and me, struggle to love as Jesus loved.

So how do we get back to the beginning? How do we get back to love? In his first epistle (letter), the apostle John tells us: “Beloved, let us love one another, for love is from God..., and God is love” (1 John 4:7-8). Love begins with God. Love *comes* from God because God *is* love. “We love because he first loved us” (1 John 4:19). Most of us probably try to be kind, caring people. We want to love the Lord our God with all our heart and all our soul and all our mind and all our strength (Matt. 22:37). And we attempt to love our neighbors as ourselves (Matt. 22:39). But sometimes we don't know *how* to do it.

And, if we're honest, we *can't* do it—at least not on our own. As fallen, sinful human beings, we're prone to pride, jealousy, selfishness, and self-righteousness. We're more likely to hurt than to help. And so, if we are to love, we first need God to love us. Love begins with God and the forgiveness Jesus won for us on the cross. Only when God's forgiving love fills our

hearts and overflows into the lives of people around us, can we really, truly love one another as Jesus loves.

Earlier on the same night that Jesus spoke the words in our Gospel lesson, he washed his disciples' feet (cf. John 13:1-15). The Son of God and Creator of the universe knelt down and wrapped a towel around his waist. He poured water into a bowl and washed the ugly, grimy feet of his disciples. He was their Teacher and *Master*, but he took the form of a servant and washed the filth and dust of the street from their smelly feet. "I have given you an example," Jesus says, "that you should do just as I have done to you" (John 13:15).

I have a friend named Laura who helps homeless people by taking care of their feet. Every week she volunteers at a shelter and trims their toenails. Maybe that doesn't sound like a big deal to you, but remember that these people rarely change their socks or even take off their shoes. They're constantly outdoors and on-the-go. Most homeless people wear through at least one pair of shoes per month. Their feet are smelly, stinky, calloused, blistered, and infected. And Laura gently holds their feet while cutting their toenails. I don't know about you, but I think that Laura understands what love looks like. Laura is a Christian, a disciple of Jesus. She loves lost and hurting people because Jesus first loved her.

God's love always comes through Jesus Christ. The Bible tells us, "God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life" (John 3:16). God proves his love for us by sending his Son Jesus to die on the cross for our sins and to rise again to give us new life. Jesus says, "Greater love has no one than this, that someone lay down his life for his friends" (John 15:13). And that's *exactly* what Jesus did for you and me. He loved us so much that he *died* for us on the cross, freely and willingly as the ultimate act of love.

And then he asks simply that we love others in return. As Jesus says, “Just as I have loved you” (*in the same way I have loved you*) “you also are to love one another” (John 13:34).

So *how* do we love one another? By doing what Jesus *did*: we lay down our lives for one another. We serve one another. The apostle John teaches us: “By this we know love, that he laid down his life for us, and we ought to lay down our lives for the brothers” (1 John 3:16). There are many ways to lay down our lives for others—some quite literally!

Again, I appeal to Church history. In ancient the 3rd century A.D. a terrible plague swept through the Roman Empire, killing thousands. As the pagans fled the cities and cast their own diseased loved ones into the streets to die, the *Christians* remained to care for the sick. At great personal risk of harm to themselves, the Christians put their lives on the line to love and care for the sick and dying. Many of these early Christian nurses died as a result. But that’s the kind of love that Jesus talks about. “See how they love one another!” (Tertullian). That’s the kind of love we need. Imagine what people would think of the Church if Christians were on the forefront of fighting the AIDS epidemic in Africa, ending human trafficking and the sexual slavery of children, and feeding the poor? Would they know we are Christians by our love?

Ultimately, love is a verb—an action word! It’s not a feeling that comes and goes. The way we love others is by laying down our lives for them. Love may require us to spend time with people we don’t particularly like. Love may require us to give money, clothing, and food to those in need—even to a homeless person on the street corner with a cardboard sign. Love may require us to set aside our prejudices about people who think, talk, speak, dress, and believe differently than we do (like the young man who visited my church). Love may require us to forgive parents, siblings, children, friends, coworkers, and church members who have hurt us deeply. And love may even require us to give up our lives for other people—just like Jesus on

the cross or the Christians during the Roman plague. Love is how we live as believers. It's what we do. It's who we are. "They'll know we are Christians by our love."

One of the things I boast about Epiphany to other pastors is how loving we are to one another. Truly, our church is a big family! I can't even begin to count how many hugs I get on a worship weekend! We have church members who cook and deliver meals to new moms just home from the hospital. Some of you visit the sick and homebound. Others of you drive the elderly and disabled to church and other appointments. Many of you volunteer at the Task Force and Senior Center. Each week our Orphan Grain Train volunteers sort and pack clothing donations. Then several times per year, a crew of 15-20 people gather to load a semi-truck full of clothes to ship to needy people around the world. Many of you volunteer and serve at our church in a number of capacities: landscaping, prayer chain, Church Council, Sunday school teachers, elders, ushers, readers, greeters, and more! Some of you care so much about lost people, that you go door-to-door to pray and share the Gospel. Or perhaps you volunteer at VBS to work with kids you don't even know so that *they* can know Jesus as their Savior. And when I fell into a black hole of despair after both my parents died in short order, many of you walked patiently with me through the darkness. I could go on and on, but we don't have enough time for that. But this is what love looks like!

"And they'll know we are Christians by our love." Jesus says it this way: "By this all people will know that you are my disciples, that you have love for one another" (John 13:35).

Alleluia! Christ is risen! *He is risen indeed. Alleluia!* In the name of Jesus. Amen.