

Sermon for March 28, 2013 – Maundy Thursday

John 13:34,35

Theme: Join the Love Feast.

- 1) *It is a celebration of Christ.*
- 2) *It is an affirmation of our unity.*

³⁴ "A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. ³⁵
By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another."

Have you ever heard of “agape meals” otherwise known as “love feasts”? First of all let me assure you that they have nothing to do with Woodstock in the 1960’s. In the early Christian Church, many congregations could not afford Church buildings, so they met in homes. After spending a morning in worship, the richer members of the congregation (often the host family) would sponsor a meal for everyone to enjoy. The purpose of this meal was to express Christian concern and love for each other. At some point during this meal, the Lord’s Supper was celebrated – remembering Jesus’ death for our sins and the fellowship he shared with His disciples on the night before His crucifixion. During that last meal before His crucifixion, Jesus gave the command to “love each other”. This is where the name “love feast” comes from.

Even though we don’t celebrate the Lord’s Supper in the fellowship hall with a big potluck, our partaking of the Lord’s Supper can still be considered a love feast. Let us consider this truth, under the theme: **Join the love feast:** 1) *It is a celebration of Christ.* 2) *It is an affirmation of our unity.*

Part One: A celebration of Christ.

Our sermon text takes place on the night before Jesus’ crucifixion. He is celebrating the Passover meal one last time with His disciples. He is also inaugurating a new supper for his disciples to celebrate in the future.

The first thing Jesus does is wash his disciples’ feet. This was the duty of a slave and not a teacher. But Jesus did this on purpose – to teach them that their “glory” should not be found in demanding service from others, but in freely serving each other, just as Jesus had served them. This is what love is all about. And this is why Jesus, shortly after washing his disciples’ feet, says:

"A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. How is this a new command? Isn't it one of the oldest commandments in the Bible, yes even the key to understanding and keeping all of God's law? Leviticus 19:18 reads: Love your neighbor as yourself. So how is Jesus' command "new"?"

It is new in this sense that it is given to the believer’s new man for a new purpose. Sound confusing? Let me explain it this way: The old command to love was given to all people as something that they *had* to do, but had no power doing on their own. The old command was like a mirror, showing the entire human race how selfish, and loveless it actually is. Outside of Christ, people can not love.

“But,” you might protest, “How can this be? I know atheists who love their family. I have seen the most ungodly person willing to die for someone else, so how can the Bible say that outside of Christ people cannot show love?”

The Bible does not say that people cannot show love, but that they cannot love as God loves. People love other people who love them back, or from whom they can receive some benefit. But the Bible describes true love as wanting to benefit someone else without getting anything in return. Perfect love is seen in what Christ has done for us. St. Paul describes it this way: *Very rarely will anyone die for a righteous man, though for a good man someone might possibly dare to die. But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us. Since we have now been justified by his blood, how much more shall we be saved from God's wrath through him! For if, when we were God's enemies, we were reconciled to him through the death of his Son, how much more, having been reconciled, shall we be saved through his life (Romans 5:7-10)!"*

Did you know that the thoughts expressed in the passages I just read are unique to Christianity? No other religion in the world speaks of such selfless love: that God would die for his enemies. And this is the love God commanded everyone to have for each other, but that humanity can never exercise. Why not? Because all human love, in one way or another, is selfish and self-serving.

The old command to love was given as a mirror to show that we need a Savior. But what about Christ's new command? It is given to believers who have a Savior. It is a new command because believers are new, as St. Paul says: *If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come! (2 Corinthians 5:17)*. Believers are united to Christ. They have His works and His righteousness covering them. They have Christ's heart beating inside of them – as St. Paul says: *I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me. (Galatians 2:20)*.

This, then, is how the command “to love” is a new command: It is not given to selfish souls as a mirror to show sin. It is given to newly restored believers, who have a new attitude. It is not given as a way to earn salvation. It is given as a way to express that we are saved.

Jesus says: *As I have loved you, so you must love one another*. How did Jesus express His love for us? By suffering and dying on the cross for our sins. This is what Jesus was about to do merely hours after speaking the words of our text. In order to perpetually remind the disciples of his love for them, Jesus instituted the Lord's Supper.

St. Paul tells us: *The Lord Jesus, on the night he was betrayed, took bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and said, "This is my body, which is for you; do this in remembrance of me." In the same way, after supper he took the cup, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood; do this, whenever you drink it, in remembrance of me (1 Corinthians 11:23-25)."*

What does Jesus mean by all this? Let me explain it with an illustration. Imagine that you were a child caught in a burning house with no way of escaping. All of a sudden, a fire fighter appears to carry you out. The problem is that the flames are so intense, that he needs to wrap you in some fire proof material. The only thing available is the jacket he's wearing. So what does he do? He wraps you in his fireman's jacket and carries you out of the burning house. You are saved because of his love, but the fireman dies because of his burns.

Now imagine that, at his funeral, the fireman's family gives you his coat to remember his sacrifice. Every time you hold that coat, you will remember how he took it off and saved you. You will remember his selfless act of love.

This is what the Lord's Supper is like. Jesus used his body and blood to save us from the fires of hell. Just as the family of the firefighter gave his coat to the survivor to remember his sacrifice, so also Jesus gives us his actual body and blood – the very tools he used to save us – so that we might always remember his

sacrifice for us. The Lord's Supper is a celebration of Jesus' love for us. It is also a celebration of the unity we share in Christ, as we will now see.

Part Two: *It is an affirmation of our unity.*

Jesus said, "As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another."

Jesus died to pay for our sins. He rose again to give us a new life. And with that new life comes a new spirit, as St Paul says: "You received the Spirit of sonship. And by him we cry, "Abba, Father (Romans 8:15)."

The new spirit we have been given through faith is a spirit that loves others as Christ loved us. Sadly, even though we have this new spirit, we also still have our old, sinful flesh, who will remain with us until the day we die. My new spirit wants to love. My sinful flesh loves only itself. It tempts me to be annoyed with my fellow Christians. It tempts me to avoid their company!

Do you think Jesus' disciples ever acted selfishly toward each other? Listen to what the evangelist Luke says happened on this very night, when Jesus told his disciples to love and serve each other: *a dispute arose among them as to which of them was considered to be greatest.* (Luke 22:24)

This is exactly why Jesus encourages his disciples, again and again, to love each other in all humility and service. And listen to how St Paul defines the love Jesus wants us to have towards each other: *Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It is not rude, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres. Love never fails* (1 Corinthians 13:4-8).

"But," you might be thinking, "I can't love like that. No one can." And, with the exception of Jesus, you are right - according to our sinful flesh we can't love like that. But according to our new man, we can. Whenever you feel annoyed or hurt by a fellow Christian, remember Jesus love' for you.

And how, exactly, does Christ express his love toward us? First of all He, died for our sins. He also has forgiven the times we have denied him and ignored him. He listens to our constant chatter, and selfish prayers. He forgives us for the times we told him be quiet, by not taking the time to listen to His Word. He forgives us for all the times we "don't have the time" for him because sports, leisure or sleep are more important. Could you imagine what would happen if we treated our friends the way we often treat Christ? Would they still be our friends? And, yet, look at the love Jesus has for us. How can we not show that same love to others?

And this is where our "love feast" comes in. Every time we partake of Holy Communion, we are reminded of the love Christ has for us. And every time we partake of Holy Communion, we are expressing the unity we have with our brothers and sisters in Christ. Jesus not only saved you, he saved everyone around you. They are all as special to him, as you are. He wants you to see them as special too – as your brothers and sisters in Him. And as we love and forgive each other, we show ourselves to truly be Jesus' disciples.

This evening, as we partake of the Lord's Supper, let us celebrate the love Christ has for us, and reaffirm our unity with each other so that, after the meal is over, we may continue to love each other as Christ loved us. Amen.

