

John 13:33-35 New Revised Standard Version (NRSV)

Little children, I am with you only a little longer. You will look for me; and as I said to the Jews so now I say to you, ‘Where I am going, you cannot come.’ 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, if you have love for one another.”

Sermon: I Believe: in the holy, catholic church.

(singing) I am the church, you are the church, we are the church together. All who follow Jesus, all around the world, yes, we're the church together.

We're looking at the church today. Specifically, we're looking at what the Apostles Creed says about the church because we've been in a sermon series on the Apostles Creed during this Lent - and we've come to that bit where it says, I believe in the holy, catholic church.

Now that word “catholic” can be like a red flag to some people. Because we're Protestants, right? We're United Methodists, we're not Catholics. But if you look at the spelling in the creed - you see that it's spelled with a small “c” and not a capitol “C”. It's not referring to the Roman Catholic Church - Capitol “C”. No, this word catholic is an adjective, it's a describing word - its describing what the church is. And that word “catholic” comes from a Greek word that means universal. It means it's everywhere. It's the shorthand version of “All who follow Jesus, all around the world, yes, we're the church together.”

“I believe in the holy, catholic church.” That word “holy”, that's also an adjective, it's a describing word, it also comes from a Greek translation and when we say it, we're saying the church is “set apart for God,” “it belongs to God.” It's God's church, it's Jesus' church, it's not ours. So, when we say “I believe in the holy, catholic church,” we're saying “I believe in Jesus' universal, it's everywhere - church.”

What's church? Well, the first verse of that song I'm singing goes like this: “The church is not a building. The church is not a steeple. The church is not a resting place, the church is a people.”

The church is a people - who've been set apart and called out to do something important, who belong to Jesus, and who are trying to be more like Jesus and to do what Jesus told us to do.

He told us to love our neighbors as ourselves, to love our enemies, he told us to always forgive, he told us to live sacrificial lives, to lose our lives, “to let go of it, is to save it,” Jesus said. He told us to tell people about him and make disciples ... He told us a whole lot more than that, but one of the last things that Jesus told us - was to love each other.

In the Gospel of John, beginning in the 14th chapter and all the way through the 17th chapter, we have what's called the farewell address. The backdrop here is the Lord's Supper. Jesus is telling his disciples that he has to go away. And there's a feeling of urgency in his voice. This is his last teaching. And throughout this last teaching of Jesus, we hear an amazing, repetitive, almost redundant use of the word “love” that we're called to consider.

In it, Jesus says, “A new commandment I give you, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another.”

And then he goes on and says, “Guess what? This is how the world’s going to know that you are followers of mine. Because of how you love each other.”

Now, I imagine one of the disciples going, “Wait a minute, Jesus. Are you telling us that the way folks are going to know if we’re following you is by how we treat each other?”

“Jesus, we were thinking about all of us maybe having the same kind of robes. You know, we had this idea that if all of us all had the same kind of robes and maybe the same kind of cool haircut, you know, the people would say, “Ooo, you’ve all got that great spiky haircut and that nice robe. You must be following Jesus.” What do you think of that one, Jesus?

“You know, Peter, he was thinking about a fish. You know, it means ‘Jesus, Lord and Savior’ in the Greek and we could all use that one and put it on the back of our cars. What do you think about that one?

“Jesus, it’s kinda boring, this idea of our loving each other. Nobody’s gonna know anything about that. How are they gonna see that? I mean, how do you market something like that? Do we run around, saying, ‘Excuse me. But do you know that we love each other?’”

It was a real problem Jesus had, because he turned to his disciples and said, “The way people are going to know your disciples of mine, is that you love one another just like I’ve loved you.

This love, that Jesus is calling us to isn’t touchy-feely stuff. That touchy-feely stuff comes and goes. The love Jesus calls us to isn’t even, primarily, an emotion. The love Jesus calls us to is an act of the will. It’s a decision that you make. It’s saying, that because I have decided to follow Jesus, I am willing to care for your well-being, even if it sacrifices some of my own. It’s saying, because I’ve decided to follow Jesus, I’m going to set my course on trying to love others like Jesus loves me.

Jesus said, “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, if you have love for one another.”

Isn’t it amazing that Jesus said our evangelism was going to be based on how we treat one other?

The church of Jesus Christ has been harmed, by people looking at us and seeing nothing different than what they see in their own mirror.

But just imagine, if in this divided, hostile, competitive, dog-eat-dog, one-upmanship world, what if - what if all the churches around the world, what if all the 2.2 billion Christians in this world, what if we all decided to live differently together - all decided to love each other like Jesus has loved us, regardless of whether or not we even like each other. We don’t have to like each other, in order to love each other in the way Jesus tells us to. Though maybe if we practice this loving long enough, some liking might come into it.

But can you imagine what a different world this could be, if everybody who followed Jesus, loved like Jesus. Jesus imagined it.

I mean, where in the world can people go? There is nothing that attracts people, there is nothing more attractive in a divided, hostile, competitive, stressed-out world than a place and a people of love, honest, genuine, sacrificial love. Standing with somebody. Caring for somebody. What an antidote.

We don't have to have it all together. God knows we don't. And so does anybody looking at us. I believe the church is more like a school, we're all learning Jesus' way of love together.

Do you want to hear my favorite definition for the church? It comes from Norman Wirzba, he's a professor of theology and ecology at Duke University Divinity School. He says the church is "the merciful and indispensable classroom in which people face their confusion about love, repent of their unloving ways, and switch from strategies of self-protection and self-enhancement to projects that seek the well-being of others."

I believe in the holy, catholic church. I believe it's my best chance for learning how to lose my life. And I believe it is for you, too. I believe it's our best chance, like Jesus said, "to let it go - is to save it".

My friends, school is not out because of this corona virus. Go on, be the church. There's somebody you need to call. You think they may be having a rough time. Call them. Say, "How are you? How are you feeling? I care about you. Is there something I can do for you? Keep practicing Jesus' way of love.