

Awakening to a New Commandment

A sermon in the Easter-Pentecost series “Spring Awakenings”

by the Rev. Dr. Jon M. Fancher

Rocky River Presbyterian Church, Rocky River, Ohio

May 1, 2016

- John 13:34-35 ³⁴“And now I give you a new commandment: love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. ³⁵If you have love for one another, then everyone will know that you are my disciples.”
- 1 John 2:3-8 However, the command I now write you is new, because its truth is seen in Christ and also in you. (v.8a)
- Romans 13:11b The hour has already come for you to awake up from your slumber, because our salvation is nearer now than when we first believed.
- Sermon-in-a-sentence: As we strive for *each* one in this church to feel connected with *someone* else here, we approach the desire of Jesus that we “love one another.”

Jesus said, “And now I give you a new commandment...” A new commandment?? What’s this?? We know about the Ten Commandments. We might even be able to recite a few of them from memory:

- Um... “Honor your father and your mother.”
- ...“You shall not kill.... You shall not steal.”
- ...Oh, and “Do not commit adultery.”
- ...What else do I remember? Oh, yes – “Remember the Sabbath day and keep it holy.”

...And then there’s the rest of the Ten Commandments conveniently listed for you in Exodus Chapter 20 or Deuteronomy Chapter 5.

But today we heard that once, when Jesus was dining with his disciples, he said to them, “And now I give you a new commandment: love one another.”

That’s new??

Well, the Ten Commandments don’t really talk about loving one another. The Ten Commandments teach how to be God’s faithful subjects, such as not worshiping other things as if *they* were God, treating God’s name and image with respect, setting aside time each week to remind ourselves of the relationship we are in: God is God, we are God’s children, but *we* are not God. The Ten Commandments teach us how we can be God’s obedient and loyal subjects.

The Ten Commandments also teach us how to be a good citizen in society. Society doesn’t work well if people tell lies about each other, or if people obsess in wishing they had things belonging to others, or if people steal stuff or violate the exclusivity of committed relationships.

So the Ten Commandments *do* tell us how to stay in line, maintaining order in society. But they fall short.

In his Sermon on the Mount Jesus explained to the crowd, “Don’t even begin to think that I have come to do away with the [teachings of the] Law and the [guidance of the] Prophets. I haven’t come to do away with them but to fulfill them.”¹ Jesus had no desire to undermine God’s authority. Jesus didn’t want to upset community orderliness reinforced by the Ten Commandments’ respect for life and property.

¹ Matthew 5:17 Contemporary English Version

But Jesus wanted to fulfill our destiny. He wanted to create something that went beyond fearful respect of God and a lawful respect for neighbors.

So Jesus gave his followers a new, simply-worded commandment: love one another. Love one another.

If you listen carefully you realize that his new commandment doesn't merely tell his followers to "love others." This goes beyond loving others. "Loving others" had been prescribed back in Old Testament times: in Leviticus Chapter 19 Moses declared that the Lord had commanded the people to love others: "Do not take revenge on others or continue to hate them, but love your neighbors as you love yourself...."² There's nothing wrong with loving others. Often that's an outward-focused love, a love that looks after the needs of people outside the group. Jesus described an example of loving others – loving someone outside one's group – in his parable of that "good Samaritan" caring for the man who had been mugged on the Jerusalem-Jericho road.

So what's "new" about Jesus' "new commandment?" It's not just about "loving your neighbor" or "loving others" like those people far, far away. Loving *one another* refers to the people you're with. Jesus could see that loving *one another* would create community among the people who hold a common faith in Jesus as Son, Lord, Savior, Master. When Jesus told his followers to "love one another" he envisioned more than nice behavior. Jesus envisioned a bond that would result in a community who would encourage each other, support each other, rescue one another, serve one another.

In practice, of course, while we may be able to serve each other without hesitation, we aren't likely to be able to have the same level of fellowship with *everyone*.

Years ago, the great Quaker writer Thomas Kelly said, "No single person can hold *all* dedicated souls within his [or her] compass in steadfast Fellowship with equal vividness." (He considered the Fellowship so important that he wrote it with a capital "F"!) Kelly went on to acknowledge that there are *degrees* of Fellowship. Although all might be within the bonds of love, some are nearer to us individually than others. Some of these who are not so near us might be nearer to others, however, making various groupings in the church that overlap.

"The total effect in a living church," said Kelly, "[is] sufficient intersection of the bonds to form a supporting, carrying network of love for the whole of [humankind]. Where the Fellowship is lacking, the church ... is lacking and the kingdom of God has not yet come. For these bonds of divine love and 'carrying' are the stuff of the kingdom of God. [Those who are] in the Fellowship [are] in the kingdom of God."³

The Quaker author's vision of a living church brings to my mind the image of children playing that game with string, the Cat's Cradle. It's been a very long time since I've played it, but as I recall, as the players loop and pull and tuck the string, they create a web of strings going back and forth between their hands in all different directions. That's what happens here as we reach out to others in the church with the love seen in friendship, participation, acceptance.

- This person knows the women of her circle and the people on her ushering team.
- Some of the people on her ushering team are related to others who teach Sunday school.
- Those who teach Sunday school know the children in their class and their parents.

² Leviticus 19:18 Good News Translation

³ As cited in "The Love Haptic" in *Homiletics March-April 2016*, Vol. 28, No. 2, 70

- Those parents know some of the deacons of our church because they also live on the same street.

We can't know everybody, but the web of acquaintance we create becomes what the Quaker author called a "supporting, carrying network for the love for the whole of [humankind.]"

So this "new commandment" was new to the disciples. Jesus intended the act of "loving one another" to build community, and trust, and interdependence among believers. It was new to them, but it's not "new" to us.

In today's installment of my sermon series about "Spring Awakenings" our attention to this "new commandment" of Jesus serves simply as a reminder. Let's remember that what we have in this church is not accidental, and it's not unimportant.

It is not a selfish thing to show Christian affection for the people gathered here because we're *not* strengthening our church community in order to *keep out* others; we're learning to live and serve and worship together to better equip us to *reach out* to our communities.

And it's not a personal failing if we don't have the same degree of love for every single person here. It's unrealistic to imagine everyone having the same affection for everyone else. What is realistic is our desire for *each* one here to feel connected with *someone* else here.

As we strive for that we approach the desire of Jesus that we "love one another."

[sermons: se20160501; © 2016 Jon M. Fancher]