

RETURNING LOVE

John 13: 31-35 May 2, 2010

Pilgrim Bud Precise

Judas has gone out. The hour had come. No turning back. The betrayal had been set in motion. It cannot be stopped now. Judas goes out. Jesus knows what this means. However, he also knows the disciples are not going to understand the implications of what has happened and what is about to happen. So Jesus uses this last opportunity to say what he wants to say to them. He doesn't address the disciples as students. He uses a term he may have saved for this special moment in his life. "Little Children" he says to these grown men. "Listen to me. I am getting ready to go to a place where you cannot come." This time together is important. Jesus decided to give an order. "I am going to give you a new commandment – that you love one another." That is it. A toddler can understand. Yet most mature believers know how hard it is to comprehend and put into practice. "By this, people will know you are my disciples, if you have love one for another." Jesus doesn't uphold the importance of the Bible. Jesus doesn't hold up the importance of carefully constructed creeds. To be sure, the time will come when the church argues-splits up over biblical interpretation, creeds, how to baptize, how to serve communion. Jesus wants us to know that his way was the way of little children – not theologians, not preachers, not administrators and governments.

In her autobiographical work, *THE SPIRAL STAIRCASE*, Karen Armstrong notes that in most religious traditions, faith is not about belief – it is about practice. Religion is not about having to believe or accepting certain difficult propositions. Instead, religion is about doing things that change you.

In writing about Muslims, she came to understand this practice. They don't have complex creeds you have to accept. Instead, they are required to perform certain ritual customs.

- a haji pilgrimage
- the fast of Ramadan
- they are to prostrate themselves in prayer facing Mecca several times each day.
- They are commanded to give alms to the poorer and more vulnerable among them as a way of cultivating the kind of generous spirit that makes them want to give graciously, as God does.

The point is that it is not a belief system – it is a process. The religious life made people act in ways that were suppose to change them forever.

I know we Christians are often concerned about who is orthodox, who is a revisionist in faith. But probably more a more important concern would have to do

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with how we act out the love of Christ in our lives. After all, Jesus did not say, “They will know you are my disciples if you believe the right things.”

“A new commandment – love one another as I have loved you.” As I have loved you talks about returning love. How do we put that into practice. We love someone by treating him/her in the right way. To me, love your neighbor as you love yourself is a summary of the commandments. How do we return this love of Jesus given to us? We return it by loving our neighbor.

- you love your neighbor by not doing murder
- you love your neighbor by not committing adultery
- you love your neighbor by not stealing
- you love your neighbor by not giving false testimony
- you love your neighbor by not coveting.
- You will not reap your field to the very edges or gather the gleanings of your harvest. Do not go over your vineyard a second time or pick up the grapes that have fallen. Leave them for the poor and the alien.

The way we live out our faith changes us forever.

I know that sometimes we get into discussing who our neighbor might be. When we get to that point, we need to look at the parable Jesus told of the Good Samaritan. The early church had a problem. Did Jesus die for “his own”, the elect, or for all of humanity – that is, did Jesus also die for the stranger and the neighbor? Should Christians be concerned with loving one another or with loving, “the world?” The parable is very clear about our reaching out in love to the neighbor, the stranger, the alien, those pushed to the very margin of society.

I am not really worried about us at Pilgrim loving each other. If we can survive moving, temporary location, remodeling, picking out chairs and furniture, I know we love each other. What binds us together at Pilgrim is not that we think alike or that we agree on things. What binds us together is we return the love to others that God has revealed to us in Jesus. And we don’t need to be afraid of reaching out to those about us. They are like us. They are hurting, they are needy, they want to be accepted, they want a place to which they can belong. We are to love one another, and to love our neighbor as a way of embodying the truth Christ reveals to us through his life, ministry, death and resurrection. That is who we are called to be as the People of God