

John 13:31-35

May 19, 2019

Grace and peace to you from God our Father, and from our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

Many of you know our family has vacationed several times along the Gulf Coast of Alabama in the communities of Gulf Shores and Orange Beach. I remember our very first trip down there. There is essentially one main highway that brings you into the town of Gulf Shores from the north. As you get just about a half-mile or so from the Gulf of Mexico there is a Welcome Center just to the right of the road with a large sign in front of it bearing the town's catch phrase, "Small Town, Big Beach." But it's not just there you will see it printed, but on T-Shirts, hats, and coffee mugs in the souvenir shops. It's found on the police cars, fire trucks, and on all sorts of promotional materials. This motto is what they want you to remember and know them by. It has become their identity, "Small Town. Big Beach." Clearly, it's worked, because that has stuck with me over the years.

If we were to come up with a slogan for our passage this morning, we could use a similar catch phrase, "Small passage. Big message."ⁱ In just a few short words, Jesus sums it up for us. "Just as I have loved you, love one another." This is how those outside the circle of Jesus' followers will know they are his disciples. Their love for one another.

"Small passage. Big message." In John, Jesus gives only one ethical imperative and this is it. "Love one another." This is the only command Jesus gives. It is true, as we heard two weeks ago, Jesus orders Peter in the 21st Chapter to feed his sheep and tend his flock. However, most likely, that passage was an addendum sometime later. Perhaps, I believe, to testify to the fact that Jesus' crucifixion and resurrection have changed everything. The love he showed them throughout his life and finally, the greatest love of all, as he lays down his life for his sheep, transforms them from merely followers of Jesus into something more. Hear Jesus' words from the 15th Chapter (vv.12-15, NRSV):

"This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends. ¹⁴You are my friends if you do what I command you. ¹⁵I do not call you servants any longer, because the servant does not know what the master is doing; but I have called you friends."

There it is again, "Small passage, Big message." Love one another as I have loved you. And notice the change that has taken place through the love Jesus has shown and will most fully give through laying down his life. The disciples are no longer simply servants of Jesus but have become his friends. Yet again, what God has done through the birth, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ has changed everything. No longer are they simply followers of Jesus learning his way, but now they are partners in his mission to love and feed his sheep.

And there is more to just how powerful this love of Jesus is and transforms who we are. At the foot of the cross as Jesus takes his final breaths and utters his final words stands his mother and the beloved disciple. Jesus says to Mary, his mother, "Woman, here is your son." And to the beloved disciple Jesus says, "Here is your mother." And from that hour, the text tells us, the beloved disciple took Mary into her home. The relationship has been changed through the greatest love of all as Jesus lays down his life. Love one another as I have loved you. "Small passage. Big message."

But there is more in just how this love changes everything. Immediately following, Jesus' death we are told that Joseph of Arimathea came before Pilate seeking permission to take down Jesus' lifeless body from the cross and give him a proper burial. The text tells us he was a "secret" disciple of Jesus because of his fear of the Jewish leaders and the very real possibility of succumbing to the same fate as Jesus. This single verse could very well have not been included. But, yet one small verse can carry with it a big message. Yet again, I think John is making a point that this great love of the Shepherd laying down his life has changed everything. Joseph's fear of what may happen to him gives way to his love for Jesus and caring for his dead body as a result of the love Jesus has shown him. No longer is he concerned about self-preservation but is motivated by love to reach out in love.

But there is still more. Immediately following the verse about Joseph of Arimathea we are told Nicodemus also came bringing a mixture of myrrh and aloes weighing one-hundred pounds in order to embalm Jesus' body. This in and of itself may not seem to mean all that much, but John reminds us that Nicodemus had earlier come to Jesus under the cover of night. This is a critical piece of information to interpreting what once again is a single verse. "Small passage. Big message." If we go back to the third chapter we recall that Nicodemus was a Pharisee, a leader of the Jews, who came to Jesus by night to acknowledge before Jesus that he knew Jesus was from God because of the signs he had been doing but still did not fully understand Jesus' true identity as the Son of God. It is within this same passage we get another small passage with a big message, v.16, "For God so loved the world, that he sent his only Son into the world so that all who believe in him may not perish but have eternal life."

Like Joseph of Arimathea, notice what has changed. Nicodemus, who initially came to Jesus under the cover of night, in secret, most likely in fear of being associated with Jesus now following his death comes to Jesus' lifeless body for all to see knowing fore well the consequences that could result in him doing this. But like Joseph, the love of Jesus has also moved him beyond his fear and self-preservation to respond in love. Everything has changed.

Jesus told those disciples that he was giving them a "new" commandment. In all reality he was giving them an old commandment that had long been a hallmark of the Jewish people. Hear these words from the book of Leviticus, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." (19:18) And, "You shall love the alien as yourself, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt." (19:34) God is love and love of the other has always been at the heart of God's will for God's people.

So, what is new about Jesus' teaching? I believe what is new is the relationship of this love between Father and Son, God and Jesus, that we are invited into. Jesus is the Word made flesh as John tells us at the beginning of his gospel. God with us. We are called into that loving relationship and we are transformed and changed through that love and we now abide in Jesus. It is this love that saves us. We enter a completely new relationship with One who created us. Jesus lays down his life for us. For his sheep. This is the greatest love of all. "Just as I have loved you, you are to love one another" he says. "Small passage. Big message."

It is this love that equips us to do what he tells Peter to do upon meeting the resurrected Christ by the lakeshore, "Feed and tend my sheep." This love of God in Jesus is the fuel that drives everything else we do as God's people. This, I believe, is why John's gospel has Jesus utter one single command. One short sentence with a very big message. Love one another. Because I have loved you. This is how the world will know you are my disciples. Christ's love changes us. It molds us. Perfects us. Abides in us. Gives us an identity and a purpose. Love one another. Love one another. Love one another. Because, Jesus has loved us! Amen.

ⁱ Courtney Allen, "Choosing Love", www.asermonforeverysunday.com