

Sermon, St. David's Episcopal, 5/15/2022, John 13:31-35 (*Elizabeth Felicetti*)

One of the things I have treasured most about vestry meetings in the years I have served here has been the way that vestry leaders take turns leading worship before the meeting. Everyone is so different. When Dana Blackman was on the vestry, for example, she sometimes led us in making crafts, and these were always such amazing experiences that no one ever wanted to go after her. We made prayer whirligig things and one Advent we made baby Jesuses. I still have mine and I put it out every Advent.

Last Tuesday, Ginny Butler led worship. She had been studying the psalms using the King James version, and then did some word searches that fascinated us: how many times does enemies come up, for example? Or hate. Or blood.

Or love. Love came up 310 times in the Bible, vs. 179 times for hate.

I love data like this. It speaks to me. I kept the handout from Ginny and revisited it several times this week, including, obviously, when preparing today's sermon, when love shows up four times. So one percent of all that love in the Bible is just in today's snippet, when Jesus told his disciples that he would only be with them a little longer and asked them to love one another the way that he loved them, and implored them to be known as his disciples by their love for each other.

We are still in the season of Easter, which lasts for fifty days in the Episcopal church. Longer than Lent. We want to celebrate those days that Christ was literally risen, before the Ascension. But even during those days—and even during stories like this, before he was crucified—Christ was preparing disciples, disciples like us, for life without him. Of course, we are never completely without him, but life now looks different than it did when he was physically on earth dazzling people, enticing them to follow him around. When he was teaching them to love by washing their feet.

At the beginning of chapter thirteen, Jesus washed his disciples' feet—so that happened right before today's reading from that chapter. Today I want you think about Jesus washing *Judas's* feet. Because he clearly did, from the way chapter thirteen is structured. Judas was still there when Jesus washed their feet.

Sometimes we might be tempted to interpret Jesus' command to love one another as be nice to everyone. That isn't love. Love is hard. Imagine washing the feet of the man who is about to betray you into the hands of people who wish you grave harm. Who want to kill you. To crucify you. Literally. That's what Jesus did. He knew that Judas was about to betray him, and he got down on his knees and washed Judas's feet.

That boggles my mind. There are people in the world whom I don't like, and who annoy me, and who irritate me. I don't like the idea of kneeling before any of them, much less washing their feet.

But that's love. Love is hard. Love is not being nice to the cute well-behaved child. Love is assuring a frazzled parent that we love having a howling child in church. Because we do. We love children, and children make noise. They disrupt.

Love is telling someone when you are unhappy with them. No one relishes telling someone important to them, “you hurt me.” But love demands this.

I used to work for a guy named Bob Randall who always brought up the movie *Love Story* in wedding sermons. I’ve stolen this from Bob in my own wedding sermons even though I’ve never seen the movie. *Love Story* has this line in it: “Love means never having to say you’re sorry.” Bob pointed out that the opposite is true for Christians: love does mean having to say we’re sorry. Having to listen when other people tell us truths that we don’t want to hear.

Now please understand, I am not saying that you have to listen to all criticism in the name of love. Some criticism is unwarranted and unfair. But when we love each other, we have to be willing to lovingly tell each other, I’m unhappy with you. You hurt my feelings. I believe you are wrong about this. No, I don’t think those pants look good on you. No, I don’t think you should do or say this thing that you really want to do or say. Yes, I think you were wrong and need to apologize.

And when we love people, when we realize that we have screwed up, we need to say, “I’m sorry.”

I remember about ten years ago, things seemed to change for me at St. David’s. The first year of being a rector was really hard, but I felt like people were trying really hard with me. The first year of a pastoral relationship is often known as “the honeymoon period.” Almost as soon as that first year went by, I felt like all kinds of crankiness broke out, and I was stymied by it.

One conflict was over some new hymnals that we bought for our then 11:15 service. I realized after I had procured these hymnals that I had not solicited much input from the people who would be actually using them. I had wanted to do it and was offered a donation so did, and then some people were unhappy.

Somehow, this came up in a discussion with the then-bishop. Now I did not run to the bishop to tell him that people were mad at me because of a new hymnal—that’s not how I operate. But it came up in a conversation, and I told him that I sought out the people who were angry, apologized, and had a conversation with them. I felt like it had gone pretty well for a mistake.

The bishop told me, “Elizabeth, never apologize for a liturgical change.”

I was shocked by that. I still am. I can admit it now because he’s not our bishop anymore. But “never apologize”?

I say, apologize to people you love. Emulate Jesus, who bent down and washed Judas’s feet. Judas, whom some might have considered an “enemy.”

Jesus said in today’s reading “By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.”

Are we known for that? I want us to be known for that. People often talk about how friendly we are, and that’s important. I also want them to know us for our love. “Oh, that church on the

corner. They love each other.” Not “They are so nice to each other,” but “they love each other and take care of one another even though they drive each other nuts.”

How can we be known for that kind of love?