

³¹ When he was gone, Jesus said, "Now is the Son of Man glorified and God is glorified in him. ³² If God is glorified in him, God will glorify the Son in himself, and will glorify him at once. ³³ "My children, I will be with you only a little longer. You will look for me, and just as I told the Jews, so I tell you now: Where I am going, you cannot come. ³⁴ "A new command I give you: *Love one another*. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. ³⁵ By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another."

What Jesus wants is not complicated. What Jesus wants is short and simple. **"This is my will, my one command, that love should dwell in each in all."** In fact it's so simple that we can express it in three words of truth. All our Wednesday night Lenten service will focus on *Three Words of Truth*, and tonight it's this: **Love one another**. Those words come from the Son of Man sitting at dinner with his disciples just hours before his arrest, trial, beating, and crucifixion. Those words come from the Son of God, who has been loving the Father, loving the Holy Spirit, living in a community of love since forever. But tonight he looks at us. **Love one another**. Ash Wednesday is a good time for us to look down your pew and ask, "how well have I loved these people?" It's a good day to look around your dinner table. How well have I loved these people? Because Jesus would have us **love one another**.

Of course the idea that we should love goes back long this story. We can go back the beginning, when God created the world knowing full well that we would sin and he himself would have to be the One to come and rescue us. Let's contrast these loves, shall we? God showed his love when he gave Adam a perfect home, a good job, a soulmate. It's glorious love! Versus Adam; he watches the snake tempt Eve. She takes the forbidden fruit and Adam prioritizes his comfort, his gain, himself ahead of the soul of his mate. Does love in your family look like God's love or like Adam's love? Just like that sin and death came to all people. In Adam, all sinned. Lord, have mercy! We need someone to love us, and God promised someone. Right there in the Garden of Eden, he promised to send the Son he loves to crush the snake, to be crushed for us. This is love, glorious love!

But Adam's descendants didn't love much better. God's people were slaves in Egypt and God set them free. As they were leaving God said, **"You have seen what I did to Egypt, and how I carried you on eagles' wings and brought you to myself"** (Ex. 19:4). These would be God's special people. What glorious love! And he wanted them to love. He said, **"love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul and with all your strength and love your neighbor as yourself"** (Matthew 22:37). How'd they do? Well, while God was giving them those commands, they were already worshiping an idol. Then they proceeded to fight and complain against one another. Does love in our community look like God's love or the Israelites' love? Lord, have mercy! We need someone to love us, and so God promised someone. **"I will raise up for them a prophet from among their brothers,"** (Deuteronomy 18:18). Jesus would come and keep the laws we shatter. This is love, glorious love.

God kept his promise. Jesus came. Don't miss that. During Lent we'll read a lot about Jesus, but why in on earth is Jesus on earth? The Bible says that God lives in the bliss and glory of heaven, in unapproachable light; there is no sadness, there is no pain, there are no problems, there are no heartaches or heartbreaks. But in our reading Jesus is not in unapproachable light. He's at dinner with a Thomas the doubter, Peter the denier, Judas the betrayer. Why on earth is Jesus on earth? He didn't need to be. He didn't owe it to us. There's one reason Jesus come down from heaven: He loves us. Jesus came here to show us love, glorious love.

Can you see him in your head, loving his family perfectly. This is love. But it gets more glorious. Can you picture him, towel around his waist, washing the feet of Judas! This is love. But it gets more glorious. See Jesus nailed to the cross. Why? See Jesus cry out **"My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"** (Matthew 27:46) Why? See the eternal love between the Father and the Son broken. Why? Because he loves you. It doesn't get any more glorious than that.

Jesus best friend wrote, **“This is love, not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins”** (1 John 4:10). Glorious love! St. Paul writes, **“God demonstrated his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us”** (Romans 5:8).

But Christ also rose from the dead to guarantee our victory. He returned to God the Father in heaven to rule the world for us. He lives in unapproachable light! And we don't. Not yet, and Jesus knows that. So he told his disciples to trust in God with their troubled hearts. And don't be afraid because all their sorrows would be turned to joy.

Friends, Ash Wednesday is a good day to ask how well we are loving. But if you've been forced to admit the shortcomings of your love, if you like me have to say, **“Lord have mercy!”** Then rejoice. God has had mercy! The Son of God has washed away your sins in his blood. Your failures are gone. They are irrelevant to how you love now!

So how do we love now? This is what Jesus wants us to know: **“This is my will, my one command: Love one another.”** Specifically, **“As I have loved you, so you must love one another.”** Someday we'll go to heaven, but until then, Jesus gave us one job: Love one another.

He said it is a new command. Really? Adam knew to love. Israel was commanded to love. Even unbelievers know we should love. I bought a used car last fall and it came with a bumper sticker that says: **“When the power of love overcomes the love of power then the world will know peace.”** You know who's picture is on that sticker? It's not Jesus! Jimmy Hendrix. So what's new about Jesus' command? It's not the command that's new. It's Jesus. A brand-new motivation comes from Jesus.

Not love based on you. Not love based on others. This love is based on Jesus. **As I have loved you, so you must love one another.**

That makes all the difference. Here's a letter from about a hundred years after Jesus died and rose. The letter was written to the Roman emperor Hadrian by a pagan philosopher who was trying to explain what Christianity was all about.

Falsehood is not found among them; and they love one another, and they don't hesitate to honor widows; and they rescue the orphans who are being abused. The one who has gives to the one who lacks, without bragging about it. And when they meet a stranger, they take him into their homes and rejoice over him as if he were a brother. . . . And if there is among them any that is poor and needy, and if they have no spare food themselves, they will fast two or three days just so they can have something to share with the one lacking food. They observe the teachings of their Messiah with much care, living justly and soberly as the Lord their God has commanded them.

The number one thing Greeks and Romans noticed about Christians (except, maybe, their willingness to die) was this: **“See how they love one another!”**

Is that what Appleton thinks of Mount Olive? We struggle to love like Jesus did. We live in the last days, when **“the love of most will grow cold”** (Mt 24:12). We limit our love. We love those who are like us, but not those who are different. We show love only when we feel like it. And so often it's just **“half-love”**: half genuinely given but the other half directed back at us so that we can feel good about ourselves, about what we've done. Lord, have mercy. He has! On our knees, crying, **“Lord have mercy!”** that's where love for one another starts.

But Jesus is bringing us a new kind of love, a Lenten love. Let's love one another. Not by focusing on our love, not by focusing on one another. Let's take 40 days to focus on Jesus, to remember how the Lord has mercy!

The marvel of his love is that it is so . . . steady. Every day, he assures us that we are his dear, forgiven children. Every day he does not treat us as our sins deserve. Every day he has mercy. Every day his love causes us to ask with the psalmist, happy yet amazed, **“How can I repay the Lord for all his goodness to me?”** (Ps 116:12).

Here is his answer, given by Jesus. Not a long list of ideas, commands, principles, guidelines, directives, mandates—no. Just these three simple words of truth: **Love one another.**

Amen.