

Marilyn Webb Sermon - Sunday 28 June 2020
Famous Last Words [3] A New Commandment (John 13:34-35)

Hello, it's good to be with you again today and have an opportunity to share God's word with you all.

I was reminded this week of a time when I left my oldest son at university for the first time. He had lived with me for twenty years and now he was going to be stepping out into this big wide world all by himself, and of course, because I'm a little bit older now, this was long before we all had mobile phones or social media or Zoom, and the day we dropped him off was so hard. I had no way of getting in touch with him directly and so I told him he had to ring me at 6 o'clock the following Sunday, and not to forget.

By the time I got home I was thinking why on earth didn't I tell him to ring me at 6 o'clock every evening and at 10 in the morning and 2 in the afternoon as well!

After all, I wasn't going to hear him coming home after a night out, and I wasn't going to know if he was safely home each night. I was used to knowing roughly where he was and what he was doing. I was used to doing things for him like his washing and cooking, and I had no idea how he was going to cope without me.

I imagined thugs beating him up on his way home from a night out and being left blooded and bruised in a ditch somewhere. I imagined him not coping with his lectures and needing a shoulder to cry on, and I was not going to be there for him. He didn't know how to live in this big wide world. He was my child and I wasn't ready to let him go.

You can imagine by the end of the week I was beside myself, everything was totally out of proportion, and I was sitting by the phone, just watching it, way before 6 o'clock. The relief when I heard his voice and found out he was ok was absolutely immense. He just thought I had completely lost the plot, which I clearly had done. I had just become overwhelmed by the sense of not being there to be with him.

As I was thinking about the last words of Jesus to his disciples, I was thinking that Jesus had that same kind of feeling, how on earth were his disciples going to cope without him? He is desperate to prepare them for a time when he would be leaving them and he won't be there telling them what to do, they will have to work it out for themselves and would they ever cope? Would they ever survive?

He knows that even though they have been with him for around three years they still don't truly get who he is and how he operates. After all, when a village would not welcome them, they offered to burn it down. Not exactly Jesus' style. He must have been wondering what on earth was going to happen to them when he was gone. And so some of his last words that he shares with them come from John 13:34,

'A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another.'

Now of course this wasn't really a new command. The disciples had heard this many times before. In the Old Testament in Leviticus, the Israelites were told to love their neighbours. And so the disciples would have known that loving other people is what God expected of them.

So why does Jesus call this a new command? Well the newness was in the second sentence, 'As I have loved you, so must you love another.' What Jesus is calling them to is a new kind of love. It isn't a token love. It isn't just words or actions that don't really cost that much. It is an all-consuming, overwhelming way of loving. A way that does not come naturally to any person, but which is the love that God has for each one of us.

The disciples just did not know at that point the extent to which Jesus loved them. He had just washed their feet, an action that speaks of servanthood. A task usually reserved for the lowest in that culture. And Jesus points out that this is what real love looks like. That this type of love he is calling the disciples and us to, is a servant love. Love is all about the other person, it is not about us. It is never about how we want to show love to someone, it's about how they will receive love. And what they need to let them know they are loved.

One of my daughters has recently lost her mother-in-law, and many people have asked them, 'How can we help?' As they are clearing out her house and are not able to get a skip, she would often say to them, 'If you're driving past the house and see some black bags on the driveway, would you pick some up and put them in your bin if you have room for them?' And lots of people have said, 'Yes that's fine, I'm happy to do that, I just want to help in any way I can.'

I was really pleased and a little surprised to hear this, because sometimes when people ask if they can help, and you ask them to do something that's probably quite menial, but which is important to you, they are really not too keen. They were hoping for a more important job, a better way to show their love.

But real love flows into service and not into pride. Real love is not about, 'Look, this is what I did for that person in need!' or 'How humble am I, that I would consider doing that, because I love that person so much!' Real love is about showing love in the way it is most needed. And that can sometimes be costly.

As Christians, we should all cringe in shame at the way some Christians have treated other people who are different from them over the years. Sometimes we have managed to make 'one another' into 'only those who are like us'. I have been reading a book that I can highly recommend by Ben Lindsay, called 'We Need to Talk About Race: Understanding the Black Experience in White Majority Churches', and I have also heard him speak online. On one occasion he said that when his mother arrived from the Caribbean she had with her a letter of recommendation from her Methodist Church, and she went into some churches here in England, and they wouldn't accept her. I'm amazed that people who claim to know and love Jesus could treat someone else like that. That is not what Jesus meant when he asked us to love one another like he has loved us.

At this point in the narrative, the disciples have no idea how Jesus is going to show his love for them. They don't know what that will mean for Jesus, and they don't understand how much it will cost him. Later that night in the garden of Gethsemane, Jesus would become so anxious that he would sweat drops of blood. He knew what was to come. And he asked his Father is there was some other way to do this? Do I have to go through this? But then he said 'but not my will but yours be done'.

Jesus showed the disciples and us what real love is, when he allowed himself to be led to the cross, when he endured the humiliation and pain of crucifixion. And yet that wasn't the worst of it. So much harder for him than the physical pain was the pain that came from his separation from his Father for the only time in all eternity, as he took all of our sin and mess on his shoulders. He paid the price for us all, he was separated from his Father, so that we could know forgiveness for everything we have ever done wrong.

That is what Jesus meant when he said, 'Love one another. As I have loved you...' He knew he was going to give up his life for his disciples and for us. That is how much he wants us to love one another as well. I am sure not many, if any, of us will be called to lay down our lives for someone else, but I am very sure that our love for one another will often fall far short of what Jesus is asking of us.

So I think there are two things for us to stop and consider just now. Have you ever known such love? Have you ever known such unconditional love that comes from Jesus? Maybe the love you have experienced has come with strings - I will love you if you love me, or I will love you if you do that for me. The love of Jesus is for us all, no matter who we are, no matter where we have been, no matter what we have done. Jesus took all of our rubbish on the cross. It was swept away as Jesus took our punishment that was due to us. We need to stop and recognise who Jesus is and what he has done for us, and then we can know that love that is beyond any other love. It's totally unconditional, with no strings attached. A love that will transform lives. It will make you different, it's made me different, it's made other people different. Knowing you are loved that much changes how you feel about yourself, and who you are.

If you have never known the love of Jesus, you've never known that unconditional love, then I encourage you to stop right now and ask Jesus to show you that love. If you want to find out some more information about what the love of Jesus feels like, looks like, what it means for you, then you can go to our website,

www.purleybaptist.org there you will find some more information about Jesus as well as contact details if you would like to speak with someone.

And for those of us who do know how much we are loved by Jesus, for those of us who do understand what he sacrificed to show us his love, I wonder if we can truly say that we love like Jesus loves us? I think probably not. I noticed recently a photograph of a Black Lives Matter supporter, and he was helping someone from an opposing protest, someone who didn't agree that black lives matter, someone who was protesting against what he stood for, yet he saw that this man was in danger, and he picked him up and carried him out of danger. That's the kind of love we're called to. To love one another.

So we need to stop and think, what are we going to do about that? What are we going to do in response to the love that Jesus gives us and to the love that he calls us to?

First of all we need to go to Jesus and ask his forgiveness for all the times that we haven't loved in the way that we should. Maybe we need to ask him through his Holy Spirit to open our hearts and our minds so that we can see, and recognise those times when we haven't loved as we should because sometimes we're just not aware of it. We need to come to Jesus and ask him to create a new heart in us, a heart that loves sacrificially and deeply, and that loves not just those who are like us, but those who are different too. And it has to start with us, here, in the church, because Jesus says that everyone will know we are his disciples because of the way we love one another.

These have been some of the last words of Jesus, when anyone shares their last words we need to take them seriously. Jesus shared his last words with his disciples and he expected them to take it seriously, he expected them to love one another as he has loved them. And he's asking us to do that as well.

Thank you for listening.