

St. Mary's Sermons

John 13:31-35

A New Commandment

I am sure that I don't need to tell you that we live in a society that is more fragmented than ever before. There is plenty of evidence to support this claim. But perhaps one of the most telling is the fact that more people live on their own these days. This is not just older people whose partners have died or single parents. As a result of this many people feel very isolated and lonely. The family unit, which has traditionally been the backbone of our society and through which, support and care for one another has been focused, is under considerable pressure. These days it is common for families to live many miles away from each other. Of course, sometimes this separation is caused by legitimate reasons. Some people have had to move in order to secure suitable employment.

I believe that this actually gives us many wonderful opportunities for seed scattering and mission, because many people, despite the church's well documented problems, are still desperately looking for a community to belong to and be part of.

I know that I've said this on several occasions before, but one of the key distinguishing marks of the early church, along with a clear demonstration of the power of the Holy Spirit, was the strong sense of fellowship and community that they enjoyed. This seems to have been one of the main reasons why the church was so attractive and one of the main reasons why it grew so quickly. Several times in the early chapters of Acts, Luke draws our attention to the very practical love that the believers had for each other and the very real sense of unity that resulted from it. Here are just a couple of examples: Act 2:42 & Acts 4:32.

It seems to me that these passages clearly indicate that the early church genuinely took Jesus' command to love one another very seriously. Jesus never told us to simply do something without also giving us a practical demonstration of how - so he qualifies this command by saying that we are to love other people with exactly the same sort of love that he has shown to us. What did he mean by that? Jesus' love above everything else is self-sacrificial.

If we adopt the same self-sacrificial approach that Jesus employed, then our likes, our needs and our desires, should take second place to the needs, concerns and desires of our brothers and sisters in Christ. In the world,

adopting such an approach is not considered to be normal and certainly does not come easily. In our individualistic and selfish society we have been brought up to look after number one. What is important is that we get what we want and it doesn't matter whose toes we tread on in the process. No wonder then that it is not the "done" thing to show any signs of weakness or need at all. I think Frank Sinatra sums up much of what is wrong with our society today in his very popular song "I did it my way".

I want to be very honest with you, I don't know about you, but personally I have always found Jesus' teaching in Mathew chapter 5-7 (often referred to as the Sermon on the Mount) very radical, very challenging and extremely difficult to put into practice in the real world in which we live. Let's think for a couple of minutes about a few examples of what has sometimes been referred to as the upside down values of the Kingdom of God.

"Do not resist an evil person. If someone strikes you on the right cheek turn to him the other also."

Ouch! Let's be honest that's really hard to do isn't it! I'm sure, like me, most parents have had to deal with numerous situations when one or other of the children have been arguing, usually about something very minor indeed, and you can see that the situation is deteriorating rapidly. One of the children has done something to the other, so the other has had to do something back. Trying to teach them to simply ignore it and that they haven't got to defend themselves is incredibly difficult.

"Love your enemies, bless those who curse you, do good to those who hate you and pray for those who persecute you."

Ouch! Once again that is so hard isn't it? But it is the only way to stop the sequence of retaliatory violence which we see all too frequently escalating until it is complexly out of control and almost unstoppable.

"Do not judge, or you too will be judged."

Sadly we are very quick to judge other people and completely overlook Jesus' teaching that in the same way you judge others, you will also be judged - and with the measure you use, it will be measured to you. And we are to forgive as

we have been forgiven. Let's pause for a moment and think about the implications of this.

Such an approach is very radical and complexly counter cultural. More than that, it is very difficult to put into practice, not least because our society frequently preserves humility to be a sign of weakness.

But, before we are too hard on ourselves, judging from Paul's teaching the early church was far from perfect and did sometimes get it wrong. On more than one occasion Paul had to write to challenge the inappropriate behaviour of Christians. In fact Paul's teaching can be just as challenging and just as hard hitting as Jesus' was.

Philippians 2 says "Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. But in humility consider others better than yourself. Each of you should look not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others."

In 1 Corinthians 10 Paul says that ". . . we are to do nothing that will cause anyone to stumble."

If we actually get this right and really learn to love one another, as Jesus taught, we just might begin to see the church really grow again. And loving each other might just be the key that releases the power of God to work amongst us in ways that we have only read about in scripture.

I have always loved Psalm 133. "Behold how good and how pleasant it is when my people live together in unity. It is like the precious oil poured on the head running down on Aaron's beard." As we know, from scripture, oil is a symbol of the Holy Spirit. The psalmist concluded by saying ". . . the Lord commands his blessing."

Why is unity so important?

Picture a lion hunting a heard of gazelle's - as long as the herd stay close together they are safe, and it is often the weaker animals that get separated from the pack and caught.

