

John 13:31-35

Read the passage: [The Message](#) or [The New Revised Standard Version \(NRSV\)](#).

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This passage is taken from a much longer, more complex and richly significant telling of Jesus' last supper with his followers before his betrayal, arrest, trial, torture and execution. The first verse of John 13 sets the context:

Now before the festival of the Passover, Jesus knew that his hour had come to depart from this world and go to the Father. Having loved (agape) his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end.

For the first 12 chapters of John, "the hour has not yet come," or "the hour is coming." But now, after having raised Lazarus, and the decision having been taken to have Jesus arrested, "the hour had come." And so, after Judas leaves to go and initiate the events that lead to his arrest and all that will follow, "Now the Son of Man will be given glory." (Note: in John, "now" and "the hour" are used non-literally to refer to whole time of the following events which are viewed as a seamless whole. In effect, time stands still during Chapters 13 to 21.)

Like a good patriarch, Jesus uses his final hours telling those closest to him what will happen in the future, bestowing blessings, and explaining what they must do in his absence in order to carry on his legacy. What is Jesus' legacy - his estate? What wealth has Jesus to leave his followers? I know it's a cliché, but the answer is love (agape). "Love as I have loved you. By this love others will know that you are my followers."

Now the commandment to love is not new. The Great Commandment to love God with one's whole self and to love one's neighbour as one loves oneself are found in Deuteronomy 6:5 and Leviticus 19:18. The only new part of this commandment is "as I have loved you."

So there are at least two challenges in this commandment. One is to deeply and correctly discern how Jesus loves and to express that way of loving in our own lives (actually this is two challenges not one).

And the other - especially for us in the old line denominations - is to let the "you" be me. In other words, the commandment is NOT: Love one another as I have loved someone else. The commandment is: Love one another as I have loved YOU (and to hear this as Jesus addressing me and not just the disciples 2,000 years ago).

I'll leave aside the "let the 'you' be me" challenge for the moment since that is a challenge I have no experience or wisdom to offer. But I do have a lot of experience of church folks trying to love one another, but NOT "as I have loved." In other words, we have put our own understandings on what loving one another means. Usually it means being nice; it can often mean tolerating bad behaviour; and it almost always means don't do anything that would cause someone to be upset and leave. Which, when you ponder Jesus' life are three things "love as I love" does not mean. I wonder what a congregation would be like if it exemplified the way Jesus loves?

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