

Faith Mennonite Church
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The command to love—the task of a lifetime

Acts 11:1-18; John 13:34-35

How long does it take to learn to love? To love the way that Jesus did: not just loving God with your heart, soul, and mind, and your neighbor as yourself (Lev 19:18), but also loving your enemy. Or loving the one you thought was a trusted follower but turns out to be your betrayer.

The words of Jesus in the 13th chapter of John, “that you love one another because I have loved you,” follow immediately on the heels of the account of Jesus washing his disciples’ feet and then the betrayal of Judas. Jesus demonstrated his definition of love, first by taking the humble role of a servant to wash feet, and then by dipping and sharing bread—an act of intimate fellowship and solidarity—with the one who would betray him. Jesus told his followers that if they’d practice this kind of humble, self-giving love, everyone would recognize that they are truly disciples—imitators—of Jesus, the model of love.

How long does it take to learn this kind of love? A very long time, it would seem. A couple millennia, in fact, for many people today say that they have yet to see or experience this kind of love in the Christian community. In 2007 the Barna research group did a survey of 16- to 29-year olds, asking their opinion of Christians. The most frequent responses were “judgmental” (87%) and “hypocritical” (85%). These responses may be the answer to another question that many church leaders from all denominations are asking: “why aren’t young people in the church today”? Perhaps it’s because they’re still waiting to see and experience a love that is humble and self-giving (not judgmental) and a love that is genuine, authentic (not hypocritical).

In the years immediately following Jesus’ death and resurrection, the community of his first followers quickly faced the question of how to live this new kind of love. Flaws of “judgmentalism” and “hypocrisy” flapped in the breeze around them too. Jewish Christians who maintained a deep commitment to keeping kosher and following the tradition of circumcision judged fellow believers who wanted to open the community to Gentiles without insisting they follow all of the Jewish legal requirements. Some Christian leaders accused other Christian leaders of being hypocrites when they tried to navigate and mediate between the old and new realities.

The story that unfolds in the tenth and eleventh chapters of Acts, about the inclusion of the Gentiles, was no doubt as visceral and divisive as our contemporary experience around the recognition and inclusion of gay and lesbian persons in the church. The author Luke tells the

story twice, indicating how pivotal this was. First, in chapter 10, there is a detailed narrative of two persons at prayer: a righteous Gentile, Cornelius, and the apostle Peter. Cornelius receives a word from God to send for Peter. Peter receives a vision of God to prepare him for his visit to Cornelius. The rest of the story details their meeting and the coming of the Holy Spirit upon Cornelius and his household. Chapter 11 begins by saying that word of these events trickled back to Judea and Peter returns to Jerusalem to give an account of what has happened. He repeats the story to them.

For those of us who have never kept kosher, we will not appreciate the need for the repetition. We might consider Peter's dream merely fanciful, something for a special-effects film crew to have a lot of fun with! But Peter's reaction of revulsion to the thought of eating these "unclean" animals, and the Judean communities' skepticism about welcoming "unclean" Gentiles, was based in a centuries-old practice of faithfulness that defined the very identity of a Jewish person.

One commentator has written that "to grasp what is involved here, there can be no better example than the revulsion felt by many Christians across the globe today at same-sex relationships... Nothing could seem, from their point of view, more "unclean." This commentator goes on to note that "revulsion, either in the ancient world or now, does not respond to theological argument. A change of heart comes when one sees the Spirit at work in the stories of [others], recognizing in them the same Spirit that is working in one's own life. People need first to see God's surprising work. Theological reflection comes afterward, either to bring what has been *seen* into coherence with past thinking, or to make a reasoned break with that thinking. In the ancient world," the commentator says, "one would search the Scriptures in order to find a place in them for the new insight. Then one would seek principles for integrating the new vision in practice."¹

This, indeed, is what we find several chapters later, in Acts 15, when Peter and Paul gather with church leaders in Jerusalem to find a theological and a practical/ethical framework for welcoming Gentiles into the Christian movement without requiring them to ceremonially become Jews. But however brilliant, Spirit-filled, and scripturally-supported the agreement was, it didn't garner a full truce and solidarity or an end to judgment and hypocrisy. In Acts chapter 21, when Paul returns to Jerusalem at a later date, after his extensive missionary work among Gentiles in Asia Minor, the fear that Paul's work among the Gentiles will erode commitments to Jewish traditions is still palpable; some even plot to take Paul out. The humble, self-giving love of Jesus was still a work in progress.

And yes, 2,000 years later it is still a work in progress. We don't have to look far to hear the strident voices of some Christians whose loudest message is fear and judgment. But, thankfully, neither do we have to look far to see the Spirit empowering those who chose love over

¹ Lewis S. Mudge, "Theological Perspective on Acts 11:1-18," in *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary, Year C, Volume 2, Lent through Eastertide*. David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, eds. Westminster John Knox Press, 2009, 452.

fear, those who choose to kneel in service to others rather than to condemn, those who offer table fellowship and listen to those who have walked a very different path speak of their deep desire to live in communion and in service to God. The work of love is a life-long work. It is the noble work that Jesus calls us to each day. Let us celebrate this high calling.