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BECOMING AN ARTIST

John 13:18-38

A few weeks ago Laurie and I watched the movie *The Jesus Revolution*. It tells the story of the Jesus Movement in the late 1960’s and early 70’s, using the revival that happened at Calvary Chapel in Costa Mesa as a representation of the larger movement. It is a beautiful, inspiring story of a great work of the Spirit of Christ. I found it touching and powerful. There was much talk about the love and forgiveness of God creating a community that is like a loving family, a place of peace that the world was, and still is, searching for.

Sadly, even the best things can be corrupted by fallen human nature. The movie didn’t hide the fact that eventually in that seemingly beautiful environment conflicts arose because of human ego and frailty. I came away from the movie eventually saddened because of some of the things that have happened subsequently. One of the key leaders in the events depicted in the movie would later help start another church, but eventually be kicked out of that church because of his unbiblical sexual activity. Later on the family of Chuck Smith, the venerable pastor who played the key role in the Calvary Chapel movement, would sue the church and its new pastor, who is Chuck Smith’s son-in-law. What happened to all that love and peace of the Spirit of Christ? Where was the power of the Holy Spirit in all of that?

I wish that was a sort of isolated story, but it’s not. The church is rife with conflict and ugliness that is far removed from the love and peace of Jesus Christ. A large percentage of the people I know who have gone into full time pastoral ministry have gone through some real ugliness. It’s like a recurring nightmare. I find this deeply disturbing because of the passage we are going to look at today. It makes me wonder if a lot of what is happening in the church is actually counterfeit Christianity. It uses the right words, says all the right things, but it lacks the definitive, invariable identifying mark of the real thing. If you encountered someone who claimed to have come upon a miracle weight loss drug, what would you think if they were 50 pounds over weight? Personally I would think if a person had found a miracle answer for weight loss I would expect them to actually lose weight. Wouldn’t that be the true identifying mark of such a drug? So it is with true followers of Jesus. They have an identifying mark. Today we’re going to see what that mark is, and hopefully learn how God wants us to live so we can live out the real thing. Let’s look at John 13:18-38.

JESUS PREDICTED BETRAYAL

In verses 18-19 Jesus said, “I know those I have chosen. But this is to fulfill this passage of Scripture: ‘He who shared my bread has turned against me. I am telling you now before it happens so that when it does happen you will believe that I am who I am.” In verse 21 he said plainly, one of you is going to betray me.”

Jesus said he knew who he had chosen, and he knew all along what Judas was going to do. None of his disciples had a clue. They even trusted Judas to be the treasurer of the group. But Jesus wanted them to know his, Jesus’ true nature. He wanted them to know he had divine knowledge, that he knew Judas’ plan before Judas knew it. So he told them what was about to happen to confirm his identity when it did happen.

Of course this news that one of them was a traitor caused great consternation among all of them. Judas would have been upset because he realized Jesus knew what he was up to. The rest of them were upset because they wondered who the traitor would be, and they feared that somehow it might be them. Jesus privately indicated to “the disciple whom Jesus loved,” which meant John himself, and to Peter that Judas was the culprit. At that point Judas left the group to pull his Benedict Arnold act. Like all the disciples, John never forgot what happened that night. He was shocked by what Judas did. None of them saw that coming. But that awful betrayal was a vivid lesson that Jesus knew what was going to happen, another evidence of his divine nature. And even knowing what was coming he walked into it with his eyes wide open. He did not shy away from it, which demonstrated both his incredible courage and his commitment to his mission. The disciples would know for a fact that the awful events that ensued were not a tragedy that he was powerless to stop, but a fate he willingly chose. This should cause us to have great admiration and love for him, because he chose this in order to love us, rescue us and give us life.

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JESUS PRONOUNCED A NEW COMMAND

This brings us to the core of this passage. In verse 34 Jesus said he was giving them a new command. It was that they should love one another. There are two important thoughts about this command that we should note.

**This is a new old command**

The command to love others was not new. Way back in Leviticus 19:18 God had commanded, “Love your neighbor as yourself.” Sometimes you will hear people exhorting us to love ourselves. They’re wasting their breath. We all are utterly committed to loving ourselves. We may do it in irrational and even self destructive ways, but we are ever trying to take care of ourselves. A month ago there was a social event in our neighborhood. About 80 of our neighbors attended. Laurie and I met a couple that were new to us and we chatted with them for a bit. A little while later Laurie asked me what the husband’s name was. I couldn’t remember. Why? Because I was so focused on what I should do and say I failed to listen when he gave his name. Fortunately that’s the only time in my life I’ve done that. Wrong. It has happened before because I love myself and am always thinking about myself. Don’t judge. You’ve done it too. Laurie had to ask his name because she’d done the same thing, and she’s way better than me. That verse commanded us to have that kind of dedication to caring for and serving others. That was part of the law. The disciples had known that all their lives. Telling them to love each other wasn’t new at all.

So this seems to have been an old command. Why would Jesus say he was giving them a new command? It was because he explained it in a new way when he added something to it. “As I have loved you, so you must love one another.” They were to love each other the way he loved them, and that took love to an entirely different level. Jesus had just washed the disciples’ feet. John described that as loving them to the very end. In his example he gave them a picture of how to love. Love by humbling yourself and serving the people you love, even to the extent of doing the most undesirable tasks for them. In what Jesus did there was a powerful demonstration of the extent and quality of his love. Jesus had just predicted that Judas would betray him. Jesus had also washed Judas’ feet knowing full well what he was going to do to Jesus. Despite the coming betrayal, Jesus had loved Judas knowing exactly what he was up to. That is a new kind of love. In fact, it was a picture of Jesus’ entire life and the way he loved. He sacrificed himself for people who even rejected him. He died for people who did not believe in him, who rejected him. Instead of destroying them, he died for them. He loved when people didn’t deserve it. This is a different kind of love from what the disciples had known.

In Matthew 5:43-44 Jesus had already talked about this kind of love. He said, “You have heard that it was said, ‘Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’” That’s how humans understand love. Love those who are deserving of your love. Love those who love you, or at least are kind to you. But Jesus went on to say, “But I tell you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you.” Love people who are ugly toward you. This is an entirely different ball game. This is not natural for us. We think we should give people what we think they deserve. Jesus gave the best, the costliest, to people who deserved the worst.

In Matthew 5:38-41 he had given a picture of how this love operates. “You have heard that it was said, ‘Eye for eye and tooth for tooth.’ But I tell you, do not resist an evil person. If anyone slaps you on the right cheek, turn to them the other cheek also. And if anyone wants to sue you and take your shirt, hand over your coat as well. If anyone forces you to go one mile, go with them two miles.” This is almost inconceivable for us. We struggle with this kind of love. It is love to a depth that is not natural to human beings.

Martin Luther King Jr. accurately referred to it as agape love, God’s kind of love, and said, “Agape does not begin by discriminating between worthy and unworthy people or any other qualities people possess. It begins by loving others for their sakes…(it) makes no distinction between friend and enemy. It is directed toward both.”

Leo Tolstoy, classic Russian novelist, said that what he learned from his human reason was basically the law of the jungle, survival of the fittest, take care of yourself. He said the natural way to think and act is he should, in his words, “throttle all those who hinder the satisfaction of my desires.” Then he said, “The law of loving others could not be discovered by reason, because it is unreasonable.”

It almost seems that way, doesn’t it? In victor Hugo’s classic novel *Les Miserable* ex convict Jean Valjean is given aid and shelter by a kindly priest, Bishop Mariel, after being paroled from prison. He had spent 19 years in prison for stealing a loaf of bread to help his starving sister and her family. He is a bitter, angry man. He rewards the priest’s kindness by stealing some of the bishop’s valuable silverware and sneaking away. But soon he is caught. He lies, claiming the priest gave him the silverware. The authorities take Valjean back to the priest to verify this story. The priest not only confirms his claim, he tells Jean he is upset with him because he didn’t take all the priest gave him, and he gives him even more valuable silver items, some candlesticks. Rather than giving him what he deserved, he showered him with grace and kindness. That’s loving as Jesus loves.

Someone sues you, and your response is to give that person more than they are suing you for? Who does that? It’s not fair, it is unreasonable. How can we possibly live like that? Jesus did, and in this command he told us that is what he directs us to do as well. We are to love the way he loved, which is sacrificing himself for people who are not deserving, who might even seek to do him harm.

Our world, our human instincts, regard this as folly. As Tolstoy said, it is unreasonable. You have to protect yourself, don’t you? You have to take care of you. In fact, we hear a lot about how you must take care of yourself before you can take care of others. What Jesus described is opening yourself up to great damage. If you live like this people are going to run all over you. They’re going to take advantage of you in every way possible. They’re going to hurt you. Yeah, they put Jesus on a cross, and he said, “Take up your cross and follow me.” That’s how we are to love.

Many years ago a friend of mine who worked in commercial real estate entered into a contract with a well known business man who was very wealthy and successful. My friend was to arrange a deal for some property for him. It was a large deal. He had to put in a lot of work over a long period of time to get the deal done, but he made it happen. When it was done my friend expected to be paid his contracted commission, which was a lot of money, but the business man refused to pay him. When my friend referred to the contract that specified he was to pay the given sum, the man simply said, “So sue me. I’m not going to pay you.” It turned out that’s how he did business all the time. He was just greedy and dishonest. My friend probably should have known that before he entered into a contract with him. But the question is, does what Jesus commanded mean that my friend just had to let him get away with it? He said if someone demands you go one mile with them, instead of objecting, you offer to go 2? Was my friend supposed to say, “Great, instead of suing you, may I do another deal for me where you don’t pay me” so he could show love to him?

We naturally start looking for objections to this radical command to love as Jesus loved. What if someone is beating you up? Are you supposed to keep turning your cheek and let them keep taking shots at you? What if someone is physically abusing you? Are you supposed to just let them do it because you want to show them love? The problem is we tend to look for extreme examples as a way of finding limits or loopholes to this command. The religious way of responding to a command like this is to insist that God spell out exactly what it means in every conceivable circumstance. What are the rules? How far do we have to take this? That’s what the Pharisees did when God said they should keep the Sabbath. They responded with, “Okay, what if I have to walk to a friend’s house? How far can I go? How many dishes can I carry to the sink before it is too heavy and thus work?” This is not about spelling out exactly what it means to love in every possible situation. This is about the heart, about a way of living that is characterized by looking out for the good of others, loving them no matter how hard it might be, no matter what they may be or do.

Jesus was saying that the right thing to do for every person in every situation is to first love them. Whatever love might demand in any situation, that is what we are to do. Does this make us vulnerable, open us up to pain? Yes, of course it does. Writer Joyce Meyer said, “Loving others always costs us something and requires effort. You have to decide to do it on purpose. You can’t wait for a feeling to motivate you.” Love always costs something. It will not be convenient. It wasn’t for Jesus.

**This is the badge of a follower of Jesus**

The next thing Jesus said was, I believe, one of the most ignored yet crucial statements in all of the Bible. “By this, everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another.” There is a defining characteristic of anyone who really follows Jesus. It is that they love other people, and they do it always.

Think for a moment about how startling this was for the disciples. They had lived all their lives in what they believed was truth revealed by God about what the identifying marks of the people of God were. They were things like being circumcised, observing the Sabbath, making the correct animal sacrifices, going to the feasts in Jerusalem, not eating forbidden foods like bacon, pork chops, baby back ribs or lobster mac and cheese. You had to do these things to be part of God’s people. These were distinctive things that were apparent to everyone. These were things that set them apart.

Jesus said if you want to be a disciple of his, thus actually be in the kingdom of God, you will be known not for any of those things, but for how you love. This is a radically different system. This had a huge impact on John. He never forgot it. To the end of his days, legend tells us, he would urge his brothers and sisters, “Beloved, love one another.” He wrote a letter that we know as 1 John, and in it, at 1 John 4:8 he said, “Whoever does not love, does not know God, because God is love.” A few verses later in verse 20 he wrote, “Whoever does not love their brother and sister, whom they have seen, cannot love God, whom they have not seen.”

One can be the most religious person on the planet, but if they don’t love, if love isn’t the clear trait of their character and life, they don’t love God, and they aren’t following Jesus. For those first century disciples this would have made one thing very clear. The most respected people in their culture were the Pharisees. They were as religious as anyone has ever been. They lived for what they thought were God’s laws. They were absurdly conscientious about obeying them. They worried about things like God’s command to give a tenth of all God gave them back to him, so they made sure to give a tenth of the herbs they grew in their garden. I think I could compete with them. I’m willing to give 100% of the cilantro I will be given in my entire life. But that’s beside the point. The point is, yes, the Pharisees were way beyond scrupulous in their devotion to keeping those rules. They had all the marks of God’s chosen people to the extent that it was the most noticeable thing about them. And they were seeking to kill Jesus. They were not loving him. They also didn’t love Romans, nor Jesus’ disciples, nor many of the common folk of their nation. That meant they were not part of God’s kingdom!

I used to play hockey in my younger days. I was never good at it, but I enjoyed playing. Hockey moves very fast. Even at the levels that I played, which, measured against good hockey, moved at a glacial pace, things happened very fast. When you gained control of a puck you had to act quickly and you didn’t have time to look around the rink to see if you recognized the guy close to you because he was a teammate, or to look for a teammate to pass the puck to. You had to make extremely quick decisions or your chance to do something with the puck would be taken from you. A big aid in that was uniforms. All it took was the quickest glance to know if a player nearby was on your team or to find an open teammate because you could recognize the color of the jersey. Or in hockey nomenclature, the sweater. I’ve often wondered if hockey is hard for color blind people. The point is, you could quickly recognize your teammates by the uniform.

The same is true of followers of Jesus. They have a uniform. It is not that they wear the same clothes (despite what many Christians throughout history have tried to claim}, or they look the same or do exactly the same things or even believe the exact same fine points of doctrine. The uniform is love. If they don’t wear that uniform, no matter what else they do, they’re not on Jesus’ team.

Suppose one day a person in a marked car with lights on the roof pulls you over when you’re driving. How do you know that person is a genuine, duly authorized law enforcement officer? Maybe they just had a car painted to look official and put a light bar on it. That sort of thing happens in the movies all the time. That person had better have a genuine badge that has been issued by a real law enforcement agency. That identifies them as the real thing. What identifies people as real followers of Jesus is love. That is the badge of a disciple of Jesus. One of the classic movie lines of all time is from way back in 1948, *Treasure Of The Sierra Madre*. “Badges? We ain’t got no badges. I don’t got to show you no stinkin’ badge.” Well, Jesus said you, as a follower of Christ, do have to show a badge, and that badge is love. Jesus gave the world the right to demand to see your badge, and if they don’t see it, to refuse to believe you follow Jesus.

This truth hit Paul right between the eyes when he became a follower of Jesus. He had been one of the most devout members of the most devout group alive, the Pharisees. He wore their uniform perfectly. Then Jesus confronted him, and told him the real uniform of a member of the kingdom of God was love. Paul had been as far from loving toward followers of Jesus as it is possible to be. He did not love, and the guilt of that cut right down to the core of his being. He learned the lesson. In 1 Corinthians 13:1 he wrote those familiar words, “If I speak in the tongues of men or of angels, but do not have love, I am only a resounding gong or clanging cymbal.” He said no matter what great, seemingly astounding religious thing I do, if love is not what drives it and characterizes every bit of it, I’m nothing. None of it matters even a little.

In my years getting a degree in math I learned, as you did, there are a couple of numbers that have some interesting multiplicative properties. One of them is the number 1. Multiply any number by the number 1 and you get the same number. 1 times 5 is 5, 1 times a thousand is a thousand, 1 times a billion is a billion. The other unique number is 0. Multiply any number by 0 and you get 0. 5 times 0 is zero, a thousand times 0 is 0, however many billion dollars Jeff Bezos has times 0 is 0. Paul said that doing anything without love is like multiplying it by 0. No matter how big and impressive it seems to be, it is actually a big, fat zero.

Writer Elizabeth George said, “It’s easy to talk about how much you love God, but loving others reveals how much you truly do.” She’s exactly right. That is what Jesus said, and it is what John never forgot and Paul proclaimed so vividly.

I have known of many pastors who have what seem to be impressive ministries that are doing great things for the kingdom of God, whose megachurches seem dynamic, magnetic and powerful. But in way too many cases, while they may be charismatic leaders, behind the scenes those pastors treat people harshly, rudely, are demanding and controlling. They aren’t loving people. Here’s what Paul claimed: that great ministry times 0 is 0. It’s a goose egg. Nada, zip, nil, bupkis. Whatever else may be true of them, if they don’t love, they don’t follow Jesus.

We will all deal with difficult people at times in our lives. We will all have confusing situations where the right thing to do is not immediately obvious. The right way to deal with people, all people, whether lovable or difficult, is to love them as Jesus loves them. The right thing to do in every situation we will ever face is to love the people involved. This is what Jesus would do. It is what he did. And it is what he calls us to do.

IMPLICATIONS

Artist Vincent Van Gogh said, “There is nothing more artistic than to love others.” Jesus wants us to be artists by painting lives that are pure expressions of the colors of love. Jesus wants us to be artists, and the most artistic thing we can do is to love other people, especially when they are unlovely. But that is often hard to do. What can help us wear the uniform of love in everything we are and do?

REMEMBER THAT LOVE IS WHAT MATTERS

This is the uniform we are to wear, the badge that we are to show the world to verify that we are genuine followers of Jesus. It is one of the main reasons God has us on the planet. It is our calling.

Paul made it clear if we miss this, we miss the whole point. I think about the San Diego Padres. They came into the season with lofty expectations as they are loaded with more talent than any Padre team in history. They have done some amazing things. At times they have bludgeoned opponents as was expected. One of their pitchers has been exceptional and has a shot to win the award as the best pitcher in the league. In one game Fernando Tatis pulled off the rarest of feats, stealing home base. But there is one thing they haven’t done, and that’s consistently win games. That failure means all the good things they’ve done are pointless. Without loving others, everything we do amounts to exactly zero. We have wasted our lives and all our deeds are pointless. That means this becomes the thing that must drive everything we do, for that is true of God. Love is the motive for everything he does, and he wants it to be for us.

The problem is, this is contrary to human nature, for our natural instinct, one that never disappears for even a moment, is to be focused on caring for ourselves. Love will require some purposeful choices always. We must be aware that we will always battle the temptation to disguise self service as love. Our efforts to get what we want masquerade as love. We must be conscious of that temptation and choose to love as Jesus did.

There will be times that loving may not be natural instinct for us. Life will present us with many challenges in the form of other people. We recently had a birthday party for Michael, Carissa and Wesley. There was a classic moment at that party. Wesley is obsessed with toys, by which he means toy trucks and cars, but especially trucks. Everything is about trucks. He has more trucks than GMC. One family member decided to give him a birthday present that was not a truck in hopes that it would be something different that he would notice and enjoy instead of losing it in the sea of trucks he already has. When Wesley opened the present he looked at it for a moment then said, “Where’s the truck?” Gotta love him. Literally, you have to love him in that moment. It was pretty funny, but there are going to be times that go beyond our ability to love because of how people disappoint us. It might be easy to be irked by that response. But he is little and cute, so it is easy to overlook it. But sometimes people will do and say things that are insensitive or even unkind. Toby and Anna have a neighbor who is very difficult. They’ve had several unpleasant encounters with her. Recently they were having some concrete work done in the backyard in the middle of the day. This woman came out and screamed at them like they were doing some horrible offense to her. The right response, said Jesus, must be to love her like he loves.

REALIZE THAT IT WILL COST

Be prepared. Any time we love it costs us something. As I said, a couple of weeks ago we had a family birthday party at our house. It was in honor of the birthdays of Carissa, Michael and Wesley, whose birthdays are all grouped in late August and early September. It involved all of our kids and grandkids as well as my mother. We planned it for a Friday night, but it turned out there was a conflict, so we moved it to Saturday, but that also ran into a conflict, so we moved it to Sunday night. Then the wannabe hurricane threatened, so we moved it to Monday night. We finally got to have the party. There were 7 grown ups and 6 kids aged 7 and down. It seemed like a lot more. There was chaos. It was also a blast. It was so much fun. We did it to express love to 3 members of our family. But that came with a cost. There was the cost of buying presents for the honorees. There was the cost of planning and pulling off the dinner which required 3 postponements. There was the cost of having 6 little munchkins do their utmost to do damage to our house. There was the cost of clean up. There was food scattered in odd places because kids are rather messy eaters, as is their grandfather. And there were toys spread all over the house and in the back yard. It took considerable effort to clean it all up.

To express love required purposeful effort. And it was all worth it and much more. It was the kind of thing that makes life full. Love always is the thing that makes life full. Costly? Yes. For certain. But worth it? Absolutely without a doubt.

RELY ON GOD’S LOVE

In order for us to have love be the uniform we wear in every moment of our lives we are going to need an endless supply of it to give to others. We all know that our resource of love is not infinite. Relying upon our own ability to love we are going to run out and we will fail. The simple truth that I have mentioned many times is we cannot give someone what we do not have.

We cannot give them what we don’t have. Our granddaughter, Bria, has celiac disease. Until that was diagnosed she was failing badly because she was literally starving. Now that her parents know the issue they are able to give her gluten free food and she is thriving. But we all have to be careful to avoid gluten for her like it is a poison, which for her it is. So she is limited in the foods she can eat. One of her favorites is gluten free waffles. At the recent birthday party I mentioned earlier she wanted those waffles. Laurie had planned to give her some gluten free chicken. But Bria didn’t want the chicken, she wanted the waffles. Unfortunately, we didn’t have any. Bria got upset because she didn’t understand why we wouldn’t give her the waffles. We couldn’t give them to her because we didn’t have them. You can’t give someone something that you don’t have. That’s the point. By they way, Bria did settle for the chicken finally and she was fine.

We can’t give others love we don’t have. We can’t give people the kind of love Jesus had if we don’t have it. That’s the good news. We do. Romans 8:38-39 says in Christ nothing can ever separate us from the love of God which is in Jesus Christ. We need to live each day utterly grounded in the truth that God loves us unconditionally and eternally. We need to live with our core identity being that we are loved by God with a limitless love. Paul’s great prayer for us in Ephesians 3:17-19 was “That you, being rooted and established in love, may have power, together with all the Lord’s holy people, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, and to know this love that surpasses knowledge.”

REQUEST GOD’S HELP

If we just grit our teeth and with determination say we are going to love no matter what, we will fail. The kind of love Jesus commanded us is not a resource any human has in an unending supply. But in Christ it is available to us. God is pouring out his love in our hearts. He says he is there to strengthen us, to give us the power to love as he loves us. All we need do is ask. He said he will answer our prayer when we ask anything according to his will. This is in accord with his will. Ask God to give us the power, the strength, the love we need to love others as he has loved us, and he will give us what we ask.