

The New Commandment

A sermon preached by Ted Atkinson, Minister, Oxford Presbyterian Church, Oxford, PA on the fifth Sunday of Easter, April 23, 1989. Scripture Lessons: Acts 14:8-18; Psalm 145:13b-21; Revelation 21:1-6; John 13:31-35.

IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER AND OF THE SON AND OF THE HOLY SPIRIT. AMEN.

"And now I give you a new commandment: love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another." Jesus said this on the night he was betrayed. Moments before Jesus had taken off his outer garment, taken a basin of water and a towel and washed his disciples' feet, including the feet of Judas who was going to betray him. He performs the most menial duty reserved for slaves. Not even a pupil was allowed to do this. A pupil could do most things for his teacher, but not this. To wash feet was fit only for slaves. St. John's believed that *because* Jesus was divine he took a towel. Because Jesus was from God and went to God, he did this. This is how God acts. This is how God loves. This is the context in which Jesus said, "Now I give you a new commandment: love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another."

Before the baptisms this morning I asked, "Do you intend to be Christ's faithful disciple?" How can people tell if someone is Christ's faithful disciple? Jesus said, "If you have love for one another, then everyone will know that you are my disciples." Love for brothers and sisters in Christ is the foremost mark of a faithful disciple. Notice, Jesus doesn't say, "If you go to church or if you're baptized everyone will know that you're my disciples" but "if you have love for one another." Jesus is talking here primarily about the love we have for other Christians.

How sad it is to see Christians fighting with one another. A man says, "I used to fight in the beer-gardens until I was saved. Now I've become an elder and fight in the session meetings." Juan Carlos Ortiz writes, "Any Christian who has been a church member for more than a year has learned

the basic skills of hand-to-hand fighting in the congregations." The fighting goes on inside and between churches. Churches declare war on one another, all for the sake of "defending the faith" and maintaining "a pure testimony." Denominations put down one another.

This morning, however, I want to share with you an opportunity we have to demonstrate to everyone that we are Christ's faithful disciples. I'm talking about Encounter '89, the evangelistic meetings that will be held in Oxford the week of September 24th. Nearly two years ago Wes Boyer, the pastor of the Media Mennonite church, shared with the Oxford Ministerium his concern for the Christians of Oxford to come together in a show of unity for the purpose of having a series of evangelistic meetings to revive the faith of Christians and to reach out to the unchurched with the Good News of Jesus. We discussed the idea. We prayed about it.

I have to admit that when the idea of evangelistic tent meetings was first brought up I felt uneasy. Tent meetings conjure up bad images of Marjoe Gortner, Jim Jones, Elmer Gantry and others. They conjure up images of hell-fire and brimstone preaching and the manipulation of emotions. I also have to admit that I prefer to see people converted decently and in order, through a confirmation or new members class. But I'll take conversions anyway God gives them. After all, Christ humbled himself to wash the feet of his disciples. In Christ, we see how God humbles himself because he loves us. Am I, are we, too proud as Presbyterians to be associated with a travelling evangelist and tent meetings?

Wes continued to bring up his concern month after month. Last Spring he invited Steve Wingfield to speak to the ministerium. Steve is a Methodist minister and an evangelist. I was impressed by Wingfield's love,

openness and theological integrity. After hearing him, the ministerium prayed and there was a consensus that God was leading. Fellow pastors from Quarreyville, New London, West Grove, and Avondale began to meet and pray. Last month about 600 people met at Sandy Cove for a dinner and to be introduced to Wingfield. There were about 10 people from our church who attended. And I want to thank Sally Bush and Laurie Sample for their work in inviting people to that meeting.

On Thursday, May 18, from 7 to 9 P.M., Christians from Oxford and the surrounding communities will gather at the Faggs Manor Presbyterian Church to pray for these services. I hope and pray that all our elders and deacons will attend. I hope and pray that many of you in the congregation will come and pray. What a wonderful way for Mennonites, Baptists, ~~Roman Catholics, Episcopalians, Methodists, Nazarenes, and Presbyterians~~ to show everyone that we really do love one another and work together to see people come to know Christ?

In the past, the community has seen churches split and fight. The world loves to see churches and denominations argue and fight and split. It just proves to the world that we're what they suspect we are, a bunch of fakes. But now, let them see Christians come together out of love for one another to pray for the salvation of our communities. If we have love for one another, then everyone will know that we're Christ's disciples. Maybe the most effective form of evangelism will take place, not at the evangelistic meetings, but before the meetings, as everyone sees Christians of all denominations who have love for one another meeting for prayer.

Two final things. First, the Love we have for one another isn't something we conjure up within our selves by the strength of our own

wills. We can only reflect Christ's love. Christ is like the sun in our solar system. We're like the moon. If we're facing Christ we'll reflect his love. If our backs are turned to Christ, our love will be cold. In the baptismal service I ask, "Do you renounce evil and its power in the world which defies God's righteousness and love?" "Do you renounce the ways of sin that separate you from the love of God?" "Do you turn to Jesus Christ and accept him as your Lord and Savior?" A Christian is one who renounces sin and evil and turns to Jesus Christ. It's something we do every day. We can't love others simply by exerting our will and telling ourselves, "I *will* love that person." Rather as we daily renounce sin and evil and daily turn to Jesus we reflect his love. Jesus wants us to be a reflector of his love.

The second final thing. Jesus commands us, "Love one another." How in the world can love be commanded? Someone will say, "You're right-- love is a commandment, but if God doesn't give us this love, then we can't do it." We're so good at getting around God's commandments. God tells us to do something, and we work things around so we hand it right back to him. We pray, "God, give me love for my fellow Christians." And then we think that if we don't love, it's not our fault- God didn't answer our prayer! Listen- love is a commandment. We don't need to ask where the love will come from. We just need to start obeying our Lord. When we obey, things will happen.

Let us pray: Turn us, Lord, and we shall turn. Convert us, and we shall be converted. Turn us to Christ so that we might reflect his love for another so that the world might believe. Amen.