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Fifth Sunday of Easter
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The Commandment of Love

John 13:31-35 *I give you a new commandment, that you love one another.
Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another.
By this everyone will know that you are my disciples,
if you have love for one another.*

*The goal of the community is to make sure that each member of the community
Is heard and is properly giving the gifts he has brought to this world.
Without this giving, the community dies. And without the community,
the individual is left without a place where he can contribute. The community
is that grounding place where people come and share their gifts and receive
from others.*

--Sobonfu Some, The Spirit of Intimacy: Ancient
African teachings in the Ways
of Relationships

*...we, members of the Church of the Covenant, do covenant with one another
that each of us will endeavor in every relationship to be a channel of God's
love and forgiveness.* --from "Our Covenant One with Another"

Jesus is leaving his disciples, going to his death, the defining moment of his life's vocation. He will give his life completely out of his love of God and the world. Jesus knows that his leaving will be very hard for his disciples. They will not have his physical presence as a source of strength. How will they continue to live this life to which he has called them?

Jesus gives the disciples a single rule to keep them connected to him, to God and to each other. "I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another." One commandment is enough—love each other in the way I have loved you. Cultivate in your life together the same kind of love I have shown you. The Gospel of John makes the life of discipleship a matter of love lived out within the community of disciples.

Why is this so important? There are so many urgent issues of human suffering, injustice, and war to be addressed. And Christ calls us to be on mission to touch some need in the world's suffering. The call to pay attention to our own community with one another may seem self-concerned and inward turning. But I think Jesus understood that the larger issues of human suffering are rooted in our failures to love the real and near person, our failure to live together as God intends.

Sobonfu Some is a West African woman of the Dagara people. She was trained by the elders to serve as elder in the tribe. She and her husband now teach the wisdom of their culture around the world. In her book The Spirit of Intimacy, Sobonfu Some writes: "It is as difficult for indigenous people to conceive of life without a community as it is for most Westerners to imagine life in a community." (p. 33) By community she means the way a village cares for every individual, where each person is heard and known, and all work together for the common good. As Jesus' community we are not only called to address the needs of the world, but also to manifest in our life together a different way of being human. It is the way of community governed by love.

But why does Jesus make love a commandment? How can you command someone to love another person? Because this kind of love is not a matter of how we feel about each other but how we treat each other, how we interact. Love in Jesus' meaning of the word is not emotions but actions. The community of Jesus is called to practice love, to work consciously and intentionally with Jesus' commandment to love one another. There are many ways we can do this.

We commit ourselves to a particular community of faith, in our case, this community. We stop looking for a perfect group of people that meets our personal requirements and expectations and we make a commitment. When we make that commitment to be in community with particular people, we begin to really learn what it means to love as Jesus loves. We begin to know God not as a theory or doctrine but as a real power and energy.

This is why the Church of the Covenant set out to be a different kind of church, one that recognized that to be a member of Christ's community means commitment, a willingness to be part of a particular community through the practicing of specific spiritual disciplines. A general commitment does not do, for it still allows us to hold ourselves aloof and apart, ready to leave at any time when things do not go our way. Commitment to community is necessary for spiritual growth and maturity. If we are not in a real community of real people learning how to really love, then we can always escape into our idealism and illusions, imagining ourselves to be loving people but not really knowing the ways of love.

We practice love by speaking from our hearts. This is a willingness to let others know who we really are, our joys and our sorrows, our strengths and our weaknesses, our wholeness and our brokenness. This is always risky business. Others might not understand. We might feel rejected. Others may not respect us if they see our weaknesses. All of those fears, however, are the ways our society has made it difficult, as Sobonfu Some says, for us to imagine being in community. Such fears keep us from trusting God's love that we know in Christ, a love that is deeper and stronger than we have yet discovered. This kind of honest sharing of our lives with one another enables us to find the depths of God's steadfast love together.

We also practice deep listening. The first ministry we owe another person, wrote Dietrich Bonhoeffer, is that of listening (Life Together). When we practice inner silence, quieting the voices in our own hearts and minds, we make space for the other person. We become truly present to another person. This is important for all of us, but especially for children, who are often not listened to with seriousness. We listen to others not in order to agree or disagree, to give advice or to fix their problems. We listen to give another person room to breathe, to be, to belong. Our capacity to listen deeply to others creates space for God's spirit to work in their lives.

A few years ago a person came into my office to talk. He was so full of anxiety and stress, feeling that his life was a total mess with no hope. As he talked, I was anxious about what to say, how I was going to respond. My struggle was to keep a quiet and listening heart. This scene has been repeated countless times over the years, the outcome always the same. I am left feeling as though I failed in some way to help. The person leaves feeling better, more centered and hopeful. We underestimate the power of listening as a form of love.

We practice forgiveness. What is forgiveness but letting go our hold on another person? Letting go of our expectations that this person should be the way we want him or her to be. We let go of our ego-centered desires for what we think is "justice," that someone pay their debt to us. Forgiving another person for the hurt they caused us does not mean we put ourselves right back in a position of being hurt again. This is important

for those who were abused as children or by another adult. Forgiveness does not mean saying everything is okay, and it does not mean staying in a relationship that is dangerous and inhumane. Forgiveness does mean letting go, releasing a person from oneself and oneself from that person. Forgiveness is the way we practice the truth that we each belong first to God and not to one another.

The commandment of love means practicing of **encouragement**. We encourage one another to be who God made us to be. We do not try to force each other into molds, creating sameness. Paul's brilliant twelfth chapter of First Corinthians is an argument for the diversity of gifts created by God's spirit. So we encourage one another to follow that particular movement of God's spirit that is ours, to be faithful to who we are and what God is calling us to do.

To love one another in this way is to be a community in which Christ is known. Christ is embodied in our community to the extent that we are practicing the commandment to love as he loves us. If we are working at that level as a community, then we will manifest the true humanity that Christ embodies. If we are not working at that level, Christ will not be known in and through us. It's that simple, says Jesus. His giving us the commandment of love is the way Christ remains with us and we with him.

I said at the beginning that the love Jesus commands us to have for each other is not a matter of feelings. If we are still functioning at the level of like and dislike, dominated by our unexamined emotional responses to each other, then we are not loving as Jesus commands. However, as we work with the practices of love in community, as each of us makes this a way of life each day, we will touch a deeper kind of affection for each other. We will come to cherish each other in a way that goes beyond our differences and conflicts. We will know what it means to love another person as a child of God.

It is very difficult for all of this to happen without a small group to which we are committed and in which we grow spiritually in the life of love. That is why the Church of the Covenant has held up the importance of what we call mission groups, two or more people who have given themselves to a specific vision for ministry to the church itself or the world. It is in that small community that we learn and practice those ways of relating which help us fulfill Jesus' commandment to love. In this way we are living together the love that we are working to show in and toward the world.

The challenge for us at this juncture in the life of the Church of the Covenant is whether or not we still take seriously Jesus' command to love, to be a community that is charged with the energy of love. Are we willing to make the commitment to a small group of people, calling that group together in mission and the life of love? Are we willing to make the commitment to move from individualism and isolation into the challenges and growth of community? If that is something you want, that you desire more than anything else, to experience and grow in the love Jesus' embodied and commanded us to have, then I ask you to work seriously in your life with this call to commitment, this call to be in community with others in the depths of love and mission. You don't have to know even what the first step is, except to have that desire and name it and claim it. From that starting point, you begin letting God show the way, to let God reveal the need to which you want to respond, and to let God connect you with others who will share the journey.