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Called to a Community 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.

It's only in community that we learn to love each other...

"In Community" by Thom Field

Jesus is leaving his disciples, going to his death, giving his life completely out of his love of God and God's world. He knows that his leaving will be very hard for his disciples. They will no longer have his physical presence as a source of strength and guidance. How can 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. For the Gospel of John, if not the whole of Christian scriptures, the life of discipleship is about love experienced and lived out within the community of disciples. The outward mission of the community will always be important, but it must be rooted in a community that is immersed in God's love known through Jesus.

Sobonfu Some is a West African woman, trained by the tribal elders to serve as an elder. She and her husband now teach the wisdom of their culture around the world. In her book *The Spirit of Intimacy: Ancient African Teachings in the Ways of Relationships*, Sobonfu Some writes: *The goal of the community is to make sure that each member of the community is heard and is properly giving the gifts she/he has brought to this world. Without this giving, the community dies. And without the community, the individual is left without a place where she/he can contribute. The community is that grounding place where people come and share their gifts and receive from others.* I found that statement remarkably like our own community's view of what it means to be a spiritual community. We do not form community simply to get things done. It is in community that we discover who we are, so that the community becomes that "grounding place" for us. To me, that is a picture of love lived out in community.

Jesus makes love a commandment to which we are faithful in our attitudes and actions. This is because the love Jesus means is not a matter of how we feel about each other but how we treat each other, how we interact. We are certainly called to have a deep affection for one another as we recognize in each other the light and presence of God our creator. The community of Jesus, however, is called to practice love, to work consciously and intentionally with Jesus' commandment to love one another.

I think that God's love which we know through Jesus is experienced, learned, and lived out within the uniqueness of each community, including our own. So I reflected on some ways we know and are to live out God's love in our community as the Church of the Covenant.

We make a commitment to a particular community of faith, in our case, this community. Listen to the opening words of "Our Covenant One with Another," the Covenant Member statement of commitment: *I understand that the purpose of our church is to bind together followers of Jesus Christ for the purpose of sharing the worship of God and in making God's will dominant in the lives of people, individually and collectively, as that will is set forth in the life, teaching, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ and in Holy Scripture...Feeling that we receive strength and encouragement from a joint commitment to Jesus Christ, we, members of the Church of the Covenant, do covenant with one another that each of us will....* This is a statement about making a commitment to community. We stop looking for a perfect group of people that meets our personal requirements and expectations, and we make a commitment. I think it is only when we make that commitment to be in community with particular people that we begin to really learn and grow in what it means to love as Jesus loves.

The most common biblical description of God is "steadfast love" (*hesed*). We will never really experience or be able to express the steadfastness of God's love until we make a commitment to be in community. Through an ongoing and deepening commitment to be in community, we come to know God not as

a theory or doctrine but as a real power and energy. And we begin to see and understanding the things that keep us from loving with God's love, as well as what enables us to love in this way. We begin to look at ourselves, gain insight, understanding, and open up more space within ourselves for God's love to live and move.

Our willingness to make a commitment to community is then made concrete through the practicing of specific spiritual disciplines. Working daily with the disciplines enables us to be and grow in community. 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 imagine ourselves to be just, compassionate, and loving people, but not really know and live the ways of God's love.

We practice God's love in Jesus by **speaking from our hearts**. This is a willingness to be honest with ourselves, and to let others know who we really are, our joys and our sorrows, our strengths and our weaknesses, our wholeness and our brokenness. This always feels risky. 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 so difficult for us to be in community. Honest sharing of our lives with one another enables us to touch the depths of God's love. It empowers us to be whole persons, unashamed of who we are as God's children, and able to live as God created us and do the things God calls us to do, not because we are particularly strong or able or spiritually accomplished, but because we are undergirded and empowered by a Love that is greater than any other love we know.

Related to this, we also practice **deep listening** to one another. 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 especially important 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 with no agenda. We listen to give another person room to breathe, to be, to belong, to touch the wonder and sufficiency of their own lives. Our capacity to listen deeply to others creates space for God's spirit to work in their lives.

When someone is sharing her or his life with us--one on one, or in a mission group, for instance--we may become anxious about what to say, how to respond. I may want to jump in to fix their problem, or just show how smart or wise I am. We think we are helping when we tell others our ideas of what they should do, when, in reality, we are suffocating them with our subtle attempts to control their lives, even out of the best of motives. If we struggle to keep a quiet and listening heart, we will be surprised how often the other person will express how much they have been helped, or how they have now seen what they need to do. True listening is a powerful form of love.

We practice **forgiveness**. Covenant and Community Members say that the hardest discipline is "endeavoring to be a channel of love and forgiveness in every relationship." What is forgiveness but letting go our hold on another person, and their hold on us? Forgiveness is 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 another person owes us. Forgiveness does not mean saying everything is okay, and it does not mean maintaining a relationship that is dangerous or 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 to love one another as Jesus has loved us means learning what it means to forgive, and practicing it again and again until we ourselves become liberated from all the ego stuff that makes us so susceptible to feeling hurt, disappointed, angry, and disillusioned. For me the bottom line is that I work to forgive another person because I don't have time to waste on all that stuff!

The commandment of love means practicing **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. This is the way God's spirit does its redemptive work in the world, through a diversity of callings and gifts.

If we are truly to be a community that takes God's call seriously and believes that each of us is given at least one gift to exercise for the good of not only the community but the world, then love is how we do that. We grow in our understanding that everyone is not called to what we feel called to. We grow in our faith that if each of us is truly being faithful to what we most deeply feel put on this earth to do, then that is the way God is

working to bring healing, justice, peace, compassion, and love to the world. To demand that others be committed to what I feel called to do is the opposite of love. And it is a lack of trust that God knows what God is doing!

There are other dimensions of our life together in which we learn what the love of God in Jesus is and how to love one another in the way Jesus commands. It is not a matter first defining love in our heads and then putting it into practice. It is a matter of discovering this love and what it means and how to live it as we live our life together as a community. Love in the sense Jesus means is not an idea but a reality and a power that is known as we live in community.

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