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The Gospel of John
XLI. Betrayal, Denial, and Love
John 13:21-38

Dr. William P. Seel
Easley Presbyterian Church
Easley, South Carolina

At the end of the foot washing last week, Jesus quoted to His disciples a verse from Psalm 41: “*He who ate my bread has lifted up his heel against me.*”¹ Psalm 41 is attributed to King David, and in this Psalm David is crying out to God in response to a rebellion against him led by his own son, Absalom. Absalom has betrayed his father, forcing David to flee for his life. But not only has his son Absalom betrayed him, so too have some of David’s closest friends. So David laments:

*When one comes to see me,
he utters empty words,
while his heart gathers iniquity;
when he goes out, he tells it abroad.
All who hate me whisper together about me;
they imagine the worst for me . . .
Even my close friend in whom I trusted,
who ate my bread, has lifted up his heel against me.*²

“*He who ate my bread has lifted up his heel against me,*” Jesus had said to His disciples. And as events unfold in our reading from John’s Gospel this morning, we can readily see why Jesus would quote David’s words of anguish in the face of betrayal.

The scene is this: the disciples and Jesus are reclining around the dinner table – reclining would be the correct description, as the custom of that time for special dinners was that the guests reclined at the low table, propped up on their left elbows in order to eat with their right hands. Reclining in the position of honor to the immediate left and right of Jesus are John, the author of our Gospel, and Judas. This arrangement helps explain the logistics of what transpires. Jesus, troubled in heart, addresses His disciples, saying, “*Truly, truly, I say to you, one of you will betray me.*” This news seems to stun the disciples. Clearly Judas’ plotting with the religious leaders has been done with great secrecy, and the disciples are completely unaware. They look at one another with questioning eyes – who could it possibly be?

Then Simon Peter, very discreetly, motions for John to ask Jesus who it is. John leans back and whispers to Jesus, “*Lord, who is it?*” And Jesus whispers back, “*It is he to whom I will give this morsel of bread when I have dipped it.*” Apparently this is a private conversation, for no one else seems aware of the meaning of what follows except for Jesus and John and Judas,

and perhaps also Peter. Such that when Judas gets up to go carry out his betrayal of Jesus, everyone else simply assumes he is going out to purchase some additional supplies for the Passover.

Jesus takes a morsel of bread, dips it into the oil, and hands it to Judas reclining beside Him. Normally, this is a gesture of deep friendship and respect – and maybe it was that night also. Maybe, somehow, Jesus was giving Judas one last chance to repent. But no sooner has Judas taken hold of the bread than Satan has taken final hold of Judas. And Jesus speaks quietly to Judas, saying, *“What you are going to do, do quickly.”* And Judas rises and goes out. As John is then careful to note, *“And it was night”* – meaning, no doubt, not only that it was evening when this occurred, but also symbolically pointing to the fact that Judas has now clearly chosen the darkness over the light. *“He who ate my bread has lifted up his heel against me.”* And thus is the prophecy fulfilled. Betrayal.

But the dinner is not yet ended – nor yet the sadness of this night. Jesus tells the disciples again that He is about to be glorified. He tells them that He will only be with them for a little while longer. He has been trying for some time now to prepare them for this moment, prepare them for His approaching death – but still they seem not to understand. Maybe they could not understand any of this until after it had happened and they remembered His words. Peter, uncomprehending, blurts out the obvious question in light of Jesus’ statement that He will soon be leaving them. He asks, *“Lord, where are you going?”* Jesus answers, *“Where I am going you cannot follow me now, but you will follow afterward.”* That is a sentence loaded with meaning. Indeed, Peter cannot now follow Jesus to the cross – this cross belongs to Jesus and Jesus alone. But after Jesus has been crucified, dead, risen, and ascended, Peter will indeed follow his Lord to the cross – as will all who follow Jesus, each in our own way dying to self, dying to sin with Jesus, that we might be raised to new life by Jesus.

But Peter cannot yet grasp any of this. He says to Jesus, *“Lord, why can I not follow you now? I will lay down my life for you.”* Again, a sentence that has so much meaning. Peter will, indeed, lay down his life one day for Jesus. But not tonight. Peter will not lay down his life for Jesus; rather Jesus will soon lay down His life for Peter and for us and for all who call upon His holy name. Jesus will lay down His life for Peter, not Peter for Jesus. In fact, what Peter is about to do for Jesus is something far less noble. *“Will you lay down your life for me?”* says Jesus. *“Truly, truly, I say to you, the rooster will not crow till you have denied me three times.”* Denial.

It is worth pausing for a moment to think about what has now become the gravity of this small scene. Judas has gone out into the darkness to betray Jesus into the hands of His enemies. Peter is about to deny even knowing Jesus. The rest of the disciples will soon swiftly abandon Jesus following His arrest. And let us add ourselves to their company. For do not we daily deny Jesus – by the ways that we act, the words that we say, the bad things that we do and the good things that we leave undone? How often do we give our allegiance to Jesus on Sunday and then offer ourselves to a whole host of false idols on Monday? How often does the name of Jesus fail to pass from our lips when we are given the chance to tell someone about Him, bear witness to what He means to us? Peter is about to deny Jesus three times; the rest of the disciples are about to abandon Him in cowardly acts of fearful self-preservation – and you and I are no different

from any of them. Jesus already knows all of this about Peter and the disciples, and about us as well. Betrayal, denial. All our failures to be what He has called us to be, to do what He has called us to do, to love as He has called us to love.

And yet hear what He calls the disciples, and us, nonetheless: *“Little children.” “Little children, yet a little while I am with you.” “Little children”* – as in His children, His precious children, His dear ones, the ones for whom He is willingly about to offer up His life. Next week, to this same group and to us, we will hear Him finish this thought by promising to the disciples and to us that He is personally going to prepare a room for each one of us, His little children, in His Father’s house, that where He is there we sinners may be also.

For just a moment, then, let us feel the great gravity of this small scene at the dinner table. We are all, like Peter and like the disciples, a hopeless bunch of sinners, betrayers, and deniers. And yet He calls us His children. He tells us He wants us – us – to be beside Him forever. He is about to go and die on a cross for us – for the love of us. Whatever else life may cause us to doubt, whatever else we may think or feel or imagine to be the case – let this one thing remain certain in our minds, omnipresent in our hearts, and writ deep within our souls: that we are loved by Jesus and that there is nothing that will ever change that fact. We are loved by the Father, we are cherished by Jesus the Son, we are graced by the gift of the Holy Spirit. Peter and the disciples and you and me – sinners, betrayers, deniers all of us, and yet all alike loved in spite of our undeserving. Never doubt it. Never, ever doubt the love of God for you. The immeasurable worth of your life in His eyes.

Which leads us, then, to the heart of this discourse around the dinner table. In the midst of everything else that is going on around this table on this night, Jesus then addresses these words to the remaining eleven: *“A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another; just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another.”* What makes this commandment new is not the commandment to love others. We are already commanded to love our neighbor as ourselves in the second of the two great commandments – love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength being the first.³ What makes this commandment new is the scope and the depth of this commandment to love. We are already commanded to love our neighbor – meaning, well, everyone! – as we love ourselves. But here Jesus narrows the scope for this new commandment. This is a commandment for how we – His little children – are to love one another within His grace-formed family, the church. He is telling us how we are to love one another specifically within the ecclesia – within the family of faith He has called together. That is the first thing that makes this commandment new – its scope. This is about the church – about how, specifically, His little children are to treat one another within the family of faith.

But the second thing which makes this commandment new, as we said, is its depth. We are commanded to love our neighbor how? As we love ourselves. We are to love everyone we meet as we love ourselves. But listen to what Jesus here commands His little children regarding how we are to love each other within the family of faith, how we are to love our brothers and sisters in the church: *“As I have loved you, you also are to love one another.”* In the church, in the family of faith, in the fellowship of this congregation, we are to love one another, not as we love ourselves, but as Jesus has first loved us. And how much bigger and broader and braver is the love those words describe? Jesus who bore the cross for the love of us. Jesus who sacrificed

Himself for our sake. Jesus who loves us even in our brokenness and sinfulness, our betrayal and our denial of Him and of His love. *“As I have loved you, you also are to love one another.”* Think, for just a moment, about what that really means for life in the church, what Jesus is asking of us who are His little children.

It means, among other things, I Corinthians 13 – that great chapter on love. We always hear Paul’s verses about love read at weddings – which is appropriate, but also possibly a little bit misleading. For Paul’s words about love are not really addressed to brides and grooms so much as they are addressed to the members of Christ’s body in the world, the Church. I Corinthians 13 is an exposition, a sermon, on this command from Christ that we love one another in the church just as He has loved us. In I Corinthians 12, remember, Paul is describing the church using the analogy of the human body – how there are many parts, each different, but each necessary and important for the life of the whole body. And then he ends that section on the church as the body of Christ by saying, *“Let me show you the way it ought to be.”*

If I speak with human eloquence and angelic ecstasy but don’t love, I’m nothing but the creaking of a rusty gate.

If I speak God’s Word with power, revealing all his mysteries and making everything plain as day, and if I have faith that says to a mountain, “Jump,” and it jumps, but I don’t love, I’m nothing.

If I give everything I own to the poor and even go to the stake to be burned as a martyr, but I don’t love, I’ve gotten nowhere. So, no matter what I say, what I believe, and what I do, I’m bankrupt without love.

*Love never gives up.
Love cares more for others than for self.
Love doesn’t want what it doesn’t have.
Love doesn’t strut,
Doesn’t have a swelled head,
Doesn’t force itself on others,
Isn’t always “me first,”
Doesn’t fly off the handle,
Doesn’t keep score of the sins of others,
Doesn’t revel when others grovel,
Takes pleasure in the flowering of the truth,
Puts up with anything,
Trusts God always,
Always looks for the best,
Never looks back,
But keeps going to the end.⁴*

And that is what Jesus means when He gives us this new commandment. We are to love one another like that, because that is how He has first loved us, His little children. This is the new commandment that He gives to His disciples that, above all else, we should love each other,

we should take care of each other, we should lift one another up whenever one of us falls, we should patiently bear each other's weaknesses and work mutually to overcome our faults. Above all else in the church's life, we are to be a people who love the way Jesus loves. A people who are loved by Jesus Christ and who, in return, love each other with that same sort of bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things love.⁵ And we are to do this, and we are enabled to do this, simply because, only because, Jesus has first loved us just like that.

"As I have loved you, you also are to love one another." And then, as if to put an exclamation point upon it, Jesus then adds this: *"By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another."* By this people will know that we belong to Jesus, are following Jesus – by the way in which we love one another within the fellowship of the church. It is the way we love one another in the church that will draw outsiders to Christ. They will feel that love when they first walk through the door – perhaps even that love will have reached out to them in the world and drawn them in. *"By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another."*

The beloved evangelical writer Francis Schaeffer once wrote a little book on this verse from John 13 – he entitled the book, The Mark of the Christian. The book opens with these words:

Through the centuries men have displayed many different symbols to show that they are Christians. They have worn marks in the lapels of their coats, hung chains about their necks, even had special haircuts.

Of course, there is nothing wrong with any of this, if one feels it is his calling. But there is a much better sign – a mark that has not been thought up just as a matter of expediency for use on some special occasion or in some specific era. It is a universal mark that is to last through all the ages of the church till Jesus comes back.

What is this mark?

*. . . A new command I give you: Love one another.
As I have loved you, so you must love one another.
By this all men will know that you are my disciples,
if you love one another.⁶*

Love is the mark of a Christian. Love is the measure of a church. The way we love one another is the way the world perceives that we belong to Jesus. And the way we love the world is the means by which the world comes to love Jesus. And so shall the glory of our Lord Jesus, and of His cross, continue to shine as a beacon of light into this world's darkness. *"So now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; but the greatest of these is love."⁷*

¹ John 13:18.

² Psalm 41:6-7, 9.

³ Mark 12:28-31.

⁴ I Corinthians 13:1-7 as translated by Eugene H. Peterson in The Message: The Bible in Contemporary Language (Colorado Springs, Colorado: NavPress, 2002), pp. 2085-2086.

⁵ I Corinthians 13:7.

⁶ Francis Schaeffer, The Mark of a Christian, accessed on-line in July, 2010 at www.ccel.us/schaeffer.html.

⁷ I Corinthians 13:13.