

"DOING THE GOSPEL"

May 7, 1989

TEXT: John 13:34 "A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another; even as I have loved you, that you also love one another. By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another"

As I said just a few minutes ago, today is a very special day in the life of this church. And I hope it is just as special to those of you who have just been confirmed. That is what we want it to be. Special! But the problem with "special" days is that sometimes we forget them after they are over. The New England colonists, for instance, used to say that the Quaker merchants of Philadelphia prayed for their neighbors on Sunday and preyed on them the rest of the week. Maybe you have known someone like that, too. Certainly most of us know how easy it is to lose the spirit of Christmas after the decorations are all down and we get back to "life as usual."

And something like that can happen with confirmation, too. Today you are all happy and excited. At least I hope you are. If you feel the way I did, the day seems special. The church seems special. You may even feel special yourself. But, after a while, whether you mean to or not, some of you may just lose interest. That is what happened to Mortimer Adler, one of the better known professors at the University of Chicago. In his book, How to Think about God, he writes, "My Sunday School attendance terminated . . . in the ceremony of confirmation. Shortly after that . . . I fell away from religious observance and became, as was characteristic of my age, a scoffer to the point of impiety."

I hope nothing like that ever happens to you. Because I have learned enough about life to know that you need the Church, the Church needs you, and the world needs both. Some pretty frightening things are happening out there. You know that as well as I do. And, while I do not pretend to have all the answers, I do know this. There is not going to be much improvement without strong and decent people like yourselves, supported by a strong and faithful Church.

And when it comes to the kind of help you are going to need as you live in tomorrow's world, just joining a church does not really mean much. You, and your world, are going to need a whole lot more than that. Perhaps that is why a recent Gallup poll

defined as "unchurched" all those who had not been to church within the past six months. Being part of a church means a great deal more than simply joining. It means worshiping together as often as possible. It means ushering, and teaching Sunday School, and singing in the choir. It means giving time and money needed to keep the church strong. It means being part of the church's life, and making the church a part of yours.

But even that is not enough. Jesus, himself, told us that. He said, "A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another; even as I have loved you, that you also love one another. By this will all men know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another" And, in the time remaining, I would like us to think about that.

The first thing we note is that Jesus, "commands" us to love. Matthew Henry, one of the great preachers of the seventeenth century, wrote, "He not only commends it as amiable and pleasant, not only counsels it as excellent and profitable, but commands it, and makes it one of the fundamental laws of his kingdom. . . ." At first that may seem a little strange, but it really is not. In fact it really helps us see what Jesus meant by love.

You see, when we think about love, we usually think in terms of feelings. And we may excuse our unlovingness by saying, "I'm sorry, but I just can't help the way I feel." And we would be right. That is why Jesus must have had something else in mind.

We can not control the way we feel, but we can control the way we act. So, if Jesus's words make any sense at all, he must have been talking about actions, and not emotions. He must have been saying, "A new commandment I give to you, that you behave in loving, caring ways. As I have always treated you with love, you must treat each other the same way."

And what way is that? Well, first of all, Jesus put the other person first. Too often we are concerned with what we want, with how we feel, with what we like. But Jesus was not like that. His concern was to give himself to others. To do unto others as we would have them do unto us. That is what he taught. And that is the way he lived. And he wants us to do the same. To think of the other guy, and not just of ourselves. To show more interest in their needs, their hopes, their hurts. "A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another; even as I have loved you, that you also love one another."

And that means treating each other with understanding and compassion. Not everyone we meet is lovable. But, then, neither were the disciples. And Jesus knew it. He knew Peter was impetuous and inconsistent. He knew Nathaniel was a bigot. He knew James and John were too ambitious. He even knew that Judas would betray him. He knew everything about them, and he loved them anyway.

And he wants us to do the same. He said "If you love those who love you, what reward have you. Do not even the tax collectors do the same? And if you salute only your brethren, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same?" After all, it is easy to be nice to those who agree with us, who always live up to our expectations, who never disappoint, or anger, or embarrass us. But what good does that do? That is what everyone else does. How does that make the world a better place in which to live? How does that witness to the love of God? How does that give unlovely people the will and the courage to change?

No, Christianity is not measured by how we relate to those who are just like us. To those who think the way we think, dress the way we dress, act the way we act. It is measured by our dealings with those who are different. With the nerds, the creeps, the bums. It is measured by how we try to understand them. By how willing we are to accept them as they are. To show them love even when they do not deserve it because we are loved even when we do not deserve it.

And that means being able to forgive. That is what Jesus did. One of his closest friends betrayed him, all of them deserted him, and Peter, whom he called the Rock, denied him three times. Again and again they misunderstood what he said and failed to apply it. By any realistic estimate they were blind and insensitive, slow to learn, and, in the end, cowards. In a word, they were human. They acted just as we do at times.

But Jesus did not condemn them. There was no failure, no disappointment, that he could not --and did not-- forgive. And not just for his friends. So great was his selflessness, his understanding, his forgiveness, that, hanging in the unspeakable agony of the cross, he could still say of his worst enemies, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do." Without that kind of compassion where would any of us be? Who could hope to find any real peace. We are frail creatures, all of us. We fail God; we fail each other; we fail ourselves. The only kind of love we can use is a forgiving love. And Jesus lived and died so that we might see and believe that love.

But, if his love is to mean anything today, you and I must do more than see and believe. He calls us first to experience it ourselves and then to share it with others. To be doers, and not just hearers, of his word. For, as John reminds us, "He who says he abides in him ought to walk in the same way he walked."

I do not pretend that it is easy. I fail more often than not. But, if the world's ever going to be what God means it to be, that is what we are called to do. It is what it means to be a Christian. "A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another; even as I have loved you, that you also love one another."