

"THE BOTTOM LINE"  
August 19, 1990

TEXT: John 13:35 "By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another."

This month, like every month, I received a copy of the church's financial statement. And so did every member of our Church Council. There, on a single eight-and-a-half by eleven sheet of paper, we get a concise summary of the church's financial health. It tells us how much money the church has received and how much it has spent; both for the previous month and for the year to date. And then, in what is often called "the Bottom Line", it shows whether we are over or under budget and by how much.

There are many companies for which that "Bottom Line" is all important. Where the company purpose is to make a profit and to give its stock-holders a good return on their investment, the "Bottom Line" answers the question, "How are we doing?" If the "Bottom Line" is good, the company is a success. If the bottom line is bad, it may be on its way to bankruptcy.

For a church, however, things are a little different. Of course, we still need to operate within our budget. Unlike the government, we can not keep spending more than we take in. But, for us, a sound financial picture by itself is not enough. Our Lord has given us a very different standard for determining how we are doing.

You can find that standard in the thirteenth chapter of John's Gospel, in the passage which I read this morning. As the passage opens, Jesus and the disciples are gathered together in the Upper Room for what we have come to know as "The Last Supper." Soon thereafter Judas takes his leave and makes his way to the chief priest to betray his master. And Jesus knows that his earthly life is rapidly coming to an end. In just a few hours he will be arrested, tried, and condemned to death. What he says now, in these last moments with his followers may well determine the success or failure of his mission.

And this is what he said. "A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another; even as I have love you, that you love one another. By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another." For them --and for us-- that is the "Bottom Line." Not "How many members do we have?" Or "What is our average attendance?" Or even "How much money do we give to missions?" --though that one comes a little

closer than the others. The "Bottom Line" for those who follow Christ is "Do we have love for one another?" "Do we love one another the way that Jesus loved?"

But, once we have said that, we are immediately faced with the question: "What did Jesus mean by love?" Where Greek has four or five different words to indicate different kinds of love, we have only one. We love our sweethearts; we love our children; we love our friends. We love our country; we love music; we even love pizza and ice cream sundaes. Which kind of love was Jesus talking about?

The answer, I think, is found in the fact that Jesus ordered us to love. "A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another." Now actions can be commanded, but emotions can not. Most of us have very little control over how we feel, but we can --or at least we should-- control the way we act. So when Jesus commanded us to love he must have been talking about what we do, about the way we treat each other. Nowhere in the Bible are we told that we have to like each other. If we do, that is fine, but, if we do not, there is probably not much we can do about it. No sense wasting time feeling guilty about it.

But, like each other or not, we can still be considerate, compassionate, and courteous. We can still be interested in the other person's well being. We can take the time and make the effort to work with them and for them, not because we like them but because we love Christ.

If you have any doubts about that, listen to what St. Paul wrote about love in that famous 13th chapter of First Corinthians. I think J. B. Phillips translation puts it best.

"This love of which I speak is slow to lose patience -- It looks for a way of being constructive. It is not possessive. It is neither anxious to impress nor does it cherish inflated ideas of its own importance.

"Love has good manners and does not pursue selfish advantage. It is not touchy. It does not keep account of evil or gloat over the wickedness of other people. On the contrary, it shares the joy of those who live by the truth.

"Love knows no limit to its endurance, no end to its trust, no fading of its hope. It can outlast anything. Love never fails."

Note, if you will, that nowhere does St. Paul confuse the issue by speaking of those warm and cuddly feelings we so often associate with the word, "love." He may encourage them, but he does not require them. There is, for instance, no reason to believe that Jesus actually liked Caiaphas, or Judas, or the Roman soldiers who carried out his execution. But he loved them enough to shake the whole of history by praying from the cross, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do."

In the grammar of Christianity, love is a verb and not a noun. It describes actions, not feelings. And it is a commandment and not an option. What Jesus asks of us is to be unselfish and generous, using our lives for others and not merely for personal interests and our own ends.

In his last moments alone with his disciples, Jesus instructed them so to love each other, so to live together, so to work together, that the world could never doubt that we are his disciples. And they did it. In the early days of the Church, it was that kind of love which impressed the pagan world and moved even their enemies to a grudging admiration. Again and again non-Christian writers remarked at how the Christians loved each other. And that love, more than anything else, intrigued and attracted a cruel and selfish world.

Today the need is much the same. Cruelty and selfishness still exist, and modern technology has made them even more dangerous. More than ever, the world needs love. But before it can love it needs to believe in love. And before it can believe, it has to see that love in practice. That is where we come in. It is not enough just to talk about love, for talk is cheap and almost never very convincing.

Someone has to demonstrate Christ's love so completely, so powerfully, so convincingly that the world --timid and fearful as it is-- may dare to believe, and, believing, may venture forth in love and for love. Jesus made it very clear who that someone is. "By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another. "Let your light so shine among men that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven.

It is not enough to say --or to sing, as we did this morning-- "I love Thy Kingdom, Lord." The real test of our Christianity, both as individuals and as a church, is not in what we say, but in what we do. The rich young man who came to Jesus claimed to have kept the commandments all of his life. But that was not enough. He had hurt no one, but whom had he helped. Our Lord has shown us what really distinguishes his people: Does our Christianity compel and enable us to be kind and thoughtful, helpful and unselfish toward others or doesn't it? Everything else is either subordinate or irrelevant.

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