

John 13:34-35

I don't think it would actually be possible to count the number of popular songs which speak about love. Love "this"...Love "that"... "Love Me Tender"... "All You Need is Love"...we could go on and on. The concept of love is quite ancient. The word, we might say, is overused to the point that it has lost its luster, even when it comes from the mouth of God. "God loves you." Well, that's nice; but we hear it so often that we tend to lose interest in the significance of the words. Even when children sing, "Jesus Loves Me, This I Know," we pay more attention to how they sing than to the words they are singing. And so when Jesus says in John 13, "A new command I give you: Love one another as I have loved you," we may think to ourselves, "What's so new about that?" And we don't really pay much attention to His words about love.

Part of our problem may be that we hear the word so much that we don't really understand what love means anymore. Love songs teach us that love is an emotion deep down within our heart; it's a feeling, a strong feeling that can make us do things and say things we would never say or do if we didn't have love. Like a sickness, it takes over our whole being.

Based upon our concept of love, we think that we're obeying Jesus' command to love one another if we simply are nice to each other. As long as we smile and put our best foot forward; hold the door; give a warm handshake...if we do these things, what more could Jesus want from us? We're showing love to each other, aren't we?

The problem is that Jesus says, "By this all men will know that you are My disciples; if you love one another." Now I've never been inside the Buddhist temple up the road, but I would expect that the people there treat each other no different from the way I just described. And they are not Jesus' disciples. In fact, they may show more love for each other there than we do here. They may take better care of their property. They may sing louder and give more of their money to support their mission. They may actually have more feeling for each other than we have here.

Do we really love each other as Jesus commands? If an outsider were to observe the effort we put into our worship, would he conclude that we are Jesus' disciples? If he were to observe our Council meetings and Voters meetings, what conclusion would he draw? What if he observed your home life—they way you talk to each other and treat each other—would he become convinced that you are Jesus' disciples? He may reach the conclusion that the Buddhists love their god more than we love ours.

Now of course this observer would have his own ideas of what love actually is. And he would surely draw some faulty conclusions if he observed us long enough. He may notice that we do not give the Lord's body and blood to just anyone who walks through that door. And he may call that unloving. He may also observe a parent spanking their child and determine that action is very unloving. The same things were said about the Apostles in the Book of Acts. The leaders of the people might have thought that Peter and John were very unloving and very disobedient because they kept preaching in Jesus' name even when they warned them not to. But their answer tells us a thing or two about love: "We must obey God rather than men!" Peter and John preached Christ boldly not because they had feelings for God in their heart, but because they were obeying Jesus' command.

Love is not an emotion. Rather, the Bible says, “Love is the fulfillment of the Law.” When Jesus says, “Love one another,” He is not commanding us to be nice to each other. He is urging us to show our love to each other by keeping the Ten Commandments. Christian parents who do not teach Jesus to their children in their home, and who do not bring their children to church, do not love their children, because they are not obeying God’s clear command. Husbands and wives, who are unfaithful to each other, do not love each other, for they are disobeying God’s command. Children, who disobey parents, teachers, and others over them, do not have love. And don’t say that you love God if you disregard His command to faithfully hear the preaching of His Word, because love is not a feeling in your heart—it is striving to obey God’s commands.

“By this all men will know that you are My disciples, if you love one another.” Just what do we broadcast to the world here at Christ Lutheran Church? I am just as guilty as you. I fail to love you as I should. It doesn’t matter how nice I am to you. What matters is that I obey God’s command to serve you as He has directed me in His Word. And I fail miserably in this day after day—just as you fail to love each other here. We deserve hell for this. There isn’t one of us who loves as Jesus commands. Even on those days when we really strive to obey God, we always fall short.

Listen to what Jesus says, “I have loved you.” That’s different from, “I love you.” It’s in the past tense... “I have loved you.” “Love one another as I have loved you.” This is wonderful comfort and hope for us. Jesus doesn’t say, “I love you,” as though He has strong feelings for us. He says, “I have loved you.” Love is the fulfillment of the Law, and Jesus did that for you. He kept the whole Law in your place, and He was crushed by the Law’s penalty for you on the cross. Jesus gave Himself up for you. He suffered the punishments that we, by our sins, have deserved. He died your death. The cross of our Lord tells us who He is... He is the One who loved us by enduring hell for us.

It is great comfort to hear Jesus say, not, “as you love each other so will I love you,” but rather, “I have loved you.” Even before you were born, Jesus loved you. While we were His enemies, He loved us. Jesus did not look for love in your heart before He died for you. Because of His love for you, He died. Because our hearts were full of sin, He died. It’s because there was no love within us that He went to the cross for us.

“By this all men will know that you are My disciples, if you love one another.” All men will know, but not Jesus. Jesus knows you are His disciple not because of your love for others, but because of His love for you—His love which poured out of His hands, feet, and side for you; His love which was sprinkled on your head in the Name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Ghost; His love which is given to you in bread and wine. You don’t have to prove your love to God. He doesn’t look at what you do, but at what He does for you. He calls you His dear child not because you love your neighbor here, but because He made you His own in your baptism. You are His disciple not because you love your family, but because He makes you who you are by His forgiving Word.

“Love each other,” He says, “As I have loved you.” Will we? Will you? Will I? Not a chance. Jesus’ love is perfect. We sinners always fall short. But we strive to love. We strive to obey Him. We strive to love because He has loved us. And where we fail, He forgives. He doesn’t forgive because we try to love. He forgives you because He died for you.

We have something here that the Buddhists do not have. They may be nicer to each other (I don't know). They may be more dedicated to what they believe in. But we have Jesus' forgiveness. We have His living Word which bespeaks us righteous. We have His body and blood which gives us life in His name.

And so after each day of dealing with life's problems; visiting with neighbors; rubbing shoulders with coworkers; interacting with the family; when we finally rest our head upon our pillow and we confess that we have not loved others as Jesus has loved us, we can take comfort in the fact that Jesus has loved us nevertheless. And He forgives you nonetheless. And that truth stands forever, no matter how much or how little love we have. Amen.