

Glorifying Love
John 13:31–35
Sunday, May 15, 2022 (Easter 5)

Let us pray: Not my word, Lord, but *your* word be spoken, that not *our* will but *your* will be done, in Christ. Amen.

The Westminster Confession of Faith, written in England back in 1646, starts off by saying that, “the chief end of man is to glorify God and to enjoy God forever.” That our *purpose* in life, the purpose of our *existence*, in which our lives find their truest, deepest meaning, is to glorify God and to enjoy God forever. I think we *get* what it means to *enjoy* God – to *find joy* in God, *with* God; to *rejoice* in God; to *delight* in God and *take pleasure* in God; to be with God in a way that expresses *joy*. We know what it means to *enjoy* something.

But what does it mean to *glorify* God? If that is our *purpose*, then how do we *do* it? If I took a quick survey here, I bet that we would get several different answers. To glorify God means to *praise* God, to *sing* praises to God. We glorify God with our *worship*, by *worshipping* God. We glorify God by living our lives for God. We glorify God by proclaiming God’s greatness with our words, whether that is through prayer or preaching or simply telling others about God. Some would say that we glorify God by working for justice; by caring for the poor and the sick and those in need in the world around us. All of these are good answers that *do* glorify God. There are *many* different ways to glorify God. Jesus points us to something else here.

This short reading from John’s gospel has three different sections or movements in it. And actually, I want you to open up your Bibles and look at this with me. It’s on page 108 in the New Testament of your pew Bibles. Chapter 13, verse 31. It’ll be easier to see what I’m talking about this way. First, in verses 31 and 32, Jesus talks about the Son of Man being glorified and

God being glorified in him. It's two somewhat confusing sentences in which the word *glorify* or *glorified* is used five times. Second is verse 33, where Jesus tells his disciples, "I am only with you a little longer, and where I am going, you cannot come." And third are verses 34 and 35, where Jesus gives a new commandment to love one another. So *glorified, only with you a little longer, and love one another*. Those are the three movements in this text, and we'll get to them in just a moment. But to better understand what's going on here, we need to put this short reading in a more complete context. Understanding what happens *before* and *after* this reading can help us understand what Jesus says here and, I think, what it means to glorify God.

This reading starts off by saying, "When he had gone out, Jesus said, "Now the Son of Man has been glorified, and God has been glorified in him." When *who* had gone out? Just reading these verses by themselves, we might think that it refers to *Jesus*. "When *Jesus* had gone out..." But it *doesn't*. This reading takes place during Jesus' last supper with his disciples, on the night that he was betrayed and arrested. Immediately *before* this reading, Jesus has just indicated that Judas is going to betray him, and we get this incredible, beautiful verse where John says, "Judas immediately went out. And it was night." He's not just telling us that it was nighttime. John is telling us that it was a time of *darkness*, of *spiritual* darkness. So when it says, "When he had gone out..." it is referring to *Judas* going out to betray Jesus. Immediately *after* these five verses, Jesus tells Peter that before the cock crows, Peter will have denied even knowing Christ three times.

So *before* these verses is *betrayal*, and *after* these verses is *denial*, both of which lead to Jesus' *suffering* and *death*. It is in the midst of *that* that Jesus talks about being glorified and God being glorified *in* him. This is something that John does a lot. He relates Jesus being *crucified* to Jesus being *glorified*. The glory of God is on full display in the crucified Christ. It seems almost

contradictory. That doesn't *seem* very glorifying. But for John, to be *glorified* means, "to reveal the true essence" of something. He is saying that the crucifixion reveals the *true essence* of God – suffering love that forgives sin.

So Jesus starts off here by saying, "Now I am about to be glorified. My true essence is about to be revealed. You're about to *see* who I really am." Then he says, "I am only with you a little longer. You will *look* for me, and as I said to the Jews, so now I say to you, 'Where I am going, you cannot come.'" *You're about to see my true essence, but then you won't see me. I'm not going to be with you much longer.*

Even though this took place *before* Jesus' death and resurrection, the lectionary has us reading this on the fifth Sunday of Easter, *after* Jesus' resurrection. In two weeks, we will be celebrating Jesus' *ascension*, when the risen Christ rose up from the earth to take his place at the right hand of God. So Jesus is only with them a little longer. The disciples will *look* for Jesus, but they won't *see* him anymore. He will not be *physically present* with them anymore. It almost feels like these words are being spoken to *us*. We, who live *after* the ascension of Christ, in a time when Jesus is not physically present with us anymore. We *look* for him, but we don't *see* him, at least not in the way his *disciples* did. And *we* can't go where *he* is, at least not *yet*.

So Judas has gone out, Jesus talks about being glorified, that he is about to suffer and die, and in a little while he will not be with them anymore. *Then* he says, "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." Put all of this together, and it's like Jesus is saying, "I am about to suffer and die. I will not be with you much longer. *But, you can still be with me, you can dwell in my presence, by loving one another.*"

It is thought that John lived for a *very* long time after Jesus died; as long as 70 years. And in that time, he wrote some *other* things – three *letters* that come later in the New Testament; letters that he wrote to Christians *decades* after the life, death, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus. In the first letter he says, “Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God; everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love does not know God, for God *is* love...No one has ever *seen* God; if we love one another, God lives in us, and God’s love is perfected in us...God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them.” He is saying to people who live *after* the life, death, resurrection, and ascension of Christ that, while they cannot *see* Christ – he is not *physically present* with them anymore – when they *love* one another, it’s like they see Christ in that other person. They experience God’s presence and love *in* and *through* that other person. Again, it’s almost like he’s saying this to *us*.

It is *also* said that John, in his old age, would constantly remind those around him to love one another. And people would ask him why he talked about this so much, why he was always telling them that. And John would say, “Because it is what our Lord commanded. If it is all you do, then it is enough.” The reason John talked about love so much – the reason *we* talk about love so much – is because *Christ* talked about it so much. It is the *most important thing*. The most important aspect of our faith is *love*. Paul writes to the Christians in Corinth about how there is faith, hope, and love, and the greatest of these is love. There will come a time when we will no longer *need* faith; we will see God face to face. There will come a time when we will no longer *need* hope; that which we hope for will become our reality. But we will *always* need love, in this life and in the life to come. Love will *always* be present. And so to *learn how to love well* is the *most important thing* that we, as followers of Jesus Christ, can do.

So in between betrayal and denial – in the midst of suffering – Christ calls us to love. *In the midst of suffering, Christ calls us to love.* What John is saying in this short reading, if we put all of this together, is that God is glorified by the way we love in the midst of suffering and hardship. Not just when it's *easy*; *anyone* can love when it's *easy*. Not just our *friends*; *anyone* can love the people who love *them*. But where God is glorified is when we *love*, when it is *hard*. “By *this*,” Jesus says, “*everyone* will know that you are my disciples” – when you *love* in the midst of *betrayal* and *denial* and *suffering* and *hardship* and *death*. The world will see us doing *that* and know that we are followers of Christ.

It's like the old hymn says, “They will know we are Christians by our love.” *Not* by our t-shirts. I was in the airport a few weeks ago, and I passed a young man wearing a t-shirt that said, “Jesus is my homeboy.” I don't know if he was wearing that as a genuine expression of his faith or just to be ironic or funny. That shirt told me *nothing* about his faith. Anyone can wear a *cross* around their neck; it's almost become as much of an icon of *fashion* as it is of *faith*.

Everyone will know that you are my disciples, *not* by our bumper stickers. *Although*, I was behind a car not long ago that had a sticker on the back window that said, “I hope something good happens to you today.” Best bumper sticker I have ever seen! I was thinking about it for the rest of the day, almost like it made me *look* for something good that was happening to me. But *anyone* can put that sticker on their car. It told me nothing about whether that person was a disciple of Jesus Christ. Anyone can put a Jesus fish on their car, but they might still give you the finger when they cut you off in traffic (not that I'm speaking from experience...).

They will know that you are my disciples, *not* by your lawn signs or your social media posts. Anyone can just throw something out there and not have it change the way they actually *live*.

They will know that you are my disciples, *not* by your political beliefs or your theology. Although, I would say that if your political beliefs or theology do not lead you to be more *loving*, then they are *bad* political beliefs and *bad* theology.

Everyone will know that you are disciples of Jesus Christ by the way we love one another in the midst of suffering and hardship. How do we *think* and *speak* and *act* with patience and kindness and hope when life is hard? *That* takes effort. It takes *work*. It takes *commitment*. But that is what our Lord commanded, and if that is *all that you do*, it is enough. In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.