

Holy (Maundy) Thursday
March 28, 2024

QUESNEL

“Love Is the Fulfilling of the Law” (Romans 13; John 13)

In Romans 13 we read: “Owe no one anything, except to love each other, for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law. For the commandments, ‘You shall not commit adultery, You shall not murder, You shall not steal, You shall not covet,’ and any other commandment, are summed up in this word: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore love is the fulfilling of the law.”

“Love Is the Fulfilling of the Law.” In other words, if you positively love others, as much as you love yourself, you will certainly not be doing bad things to them, things that the Ten Commandments forbid, like murder, adultery, stealing, and so on. Simply love people—treat them right, do good to them—and, in so doing, you will be fulfilling God’s law.

Of course, the problem is that we don’t. We don’t love like we ought. We act selfishly. We treat others less than we like to do for ourselves. We have not kept God’s good and holy law as we ought. That is what sin is. God tells us to love our fellow human creatures, and we don’t listen to him. We tune out God, and we hurt one another. We put our own desires above the needs of others. If it’s going to cost us—our time, our money, our effort—we don’t like to do it, and so we try to avoid doing the loving thing. Love is the fulfilling of the law, and, to look at it honestly, we fall short, every one of us.

But there is one who does not fall short. Instead, he falls to his knees, takes the wash basin and the towel, and serves others at his own expense. That is our Lord Jesus Christ. Love is the fulfilling of the law, and Jesus fulfills it perfectly. Indeed, he takes love to a new level.

“Love is the fulfilling of the law.” Jesus first fulfills it perfectly for us. And then he calls us, his disciples, to follow him in Christ-like love for one another. That is the message for us tonight on this Maundy Thursday.

First comes Jesus' perfect love for us. In John 13 we read: "Now before the Feast of the Passover, when Jesus knew that his hour had come to depart out of this world to the Father, having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end."

"He loved them to the end." What love this is! The Lord and master of these disciples doing a servant's work: getting down on his knees and washing their feet. Humble, lowly service. Peter objects. He realizes that, really, it should be the other way around. But Jesus insists: "I need to wash you, Peter. You need to be served by me. There is no other way for you to belong to me."

You see, Jesus came to serve, not to be served. This was how it had to be, if there is to be any hope for us sinners. "The Son of Man came not to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many." Christ Jesus, God's own Son, "made himself nothing, taking the form of a servant"; "he humbled himself and became obedient unto death, even death on a cross." That is who this man with the towel is. Jesus fulfills the law of love; he takes love to a new level, by getting down on his knees to wash feet and then by being lifted up on a cross to wash away our sins.

"Having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end." "He loved them to the end": What does that mean? There are a couple possible ways to understand this. One is that "to the end" means "to the end of his time with them." Jesus loved his disciples all the way up to the end of his time with them. Another way to understand "to the end" would be that Jesus loved his disciples "to the uttermost, to the nth degree, to the fullest possible extent." And either reading makes sense. Both are true. Jesus loved his disciples to the end of his time with them, and he loved them to the uttermost extent.

But I think we can even say more. The phrase translated here, "to the end," is, in the Greek, "eis telos." "Eis telos," literally, "unto the goal," that is, "until the goal is reached." "Telos" is the Greek word for "goal," the end or destination you're reaching for. And a form of this same word "telos" comes up again on the next day, Good Friday, when Jesus is hanging on the cross. As Jesus is dying there, knowing that he has accomplished everything necessary for our salvation, he cries out with a loud voice, "Tetelestai!" "It is finished!" "Tetelestai!" The goal, the "telos," has been reached! What Jesus, the Son of God, came to do was to serve humanity by dying for the sins of the world, and now the goal has been reached.

And so I think this informs this phrase in John 13, “he loved them to the end.” Christ’s love would not stop until he had accomplished everything he set out to do. The humble serving that Christ demonstrates in washing the disciples’ feet is of a piece with his mighty, self-sacrificing love which will reach its goal on the cross on the following day.

Love is the fulfilling of the law, and Jesus takes love to a new level. That is what is new, then, about the new commandment that Jesus gives his disciples, when he says: “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.”

It’s the “just as I have loved you”—that’s what’s new in this new commandment. Certainly, God’s people had been told from of old to love their neighbor, to love one another. But what is new is that now we know and we receive the greatest love there is, namely, the love of Christ our Lord. “Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends.” And that is what Christ is doing here in his Passion. And we have this love, we have received it from him, we have experienced it for ourselves. And so now we have a new source with which to love others. We have Christ’s love, more than just an example—it is that, but it is more than that—it is our source, our wellspring, for loving others.

Love is the fulfilling of the law, and Jesus takes love to a new level: the level of a lowly servant who lays down his life for you and me. This is what love is, Christ’s self-sacrificing servanthood. Love so amazing, so divine!

Christ seals his covenant of love with us here in this meal that he institutes this night. In the Lord’s Supper, the Sacrament of the Altar, our Lord gives us his body and blood, the body he gave and the blood he shed on the cross for us, for the forgiveness of our sins. In this feast of love, Christ blesses us now. And through the same, you and I are strengthened in fervent love toward one another. Christ’s commandment is that we love one another as he has loved us. Christ’s Communion will strengthen us to do that very thing. Come and receive.