

“LOOK WHO’S TALKING”

A Sermon for the Fifth Sunday of Easter, April 24, 2016

Text: John 13:31-35

Many years ago I heard this story about Gandhi. I don't know if it's true, but it is certainly plausible.

A young boy had become obsessed with eating sweets. His mother was very upset with this. No matter how much she scolded him he continued to indulge his sweet tooth. Frustrated, she decided to take her son to see Mahatma Gandhi, who was the boy's idol.

She had to walk many miles across the country under a scorching sun to reach Gandhi's ashram. There she recounted her difficult journey and shared the situation with Gandhi:

"Bapu (Father), my son eats too many sweets, which is not good for his health. He won't listen to me, but I think he will listen to you. Will you advise him to stop?"

Gandhi thought for a while, and replied: "Please come back after two weeks. Then I will talk to your son."

The woman was puzzled but did so. She took the boy home. Two weeks later she went back to see the great man. But Gandhi put her off again, asking her again to return in two weeks.

The next time she came, Gandhi looked directly at the boy and said: "Boy, you should stop eating so much sugar. It is not good for your health."

The boy nodded and promised to obey him.

Then the boy's mother turned to Gandhi and asked, "Bapu, why didn't you tell him that four weeks ago?"

Gandhi smiled and whispered into her ear: "At that time I was not qualified to advise the little one because I had the same bad habit. I had to master

that difficulty in myself before I could tell him what to do."

Hmm.

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When someone tells us what to do, gives us an order or a suggestion, it is a very good idea to take a look at who's talking. If they aren't following their own advice, I don't think you would follow it, would you? Gandhi had too much integrity to tell the boy to lay off candy when he himself was guilty of the same overindulgence.

"Look who's talking" is always good advice. (That is why I wear a robe on Sundays while preaching and leading worship. Anything I say that is true and good and of value you should attribute not to me but to the one on whose authority I speak to you. For example, when I say "I forgive you all your sins," that only works because I do it "as a called and ordained minister of Christ's church, and he has told us to say this. Who's talking? It's not just me.)

The scene of today's gospel reading is Jesus' last evening before the crucifixion. He had just washed his disciples' feet. Then he had a little talk with Judas, and Judas left. Then he turned to the others and said "I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another."

Look who's talking! Shall we?

"Who's talking" is a crucial element of this story. Jesus draws attention to the fact that he is the one who is telling them to love one another. He doesn't just open his mouth and drop these pearls on them: "Love one another." He specifies: "I give you a new

commandment.” He takes ownership of the commandment by calling it new, and by stipulating that he is giving it to them. He wants them to look at who’s talking!

Christians love one another not because in our own wisdom we have figured out that love is a wonderful principle. We love one another in obedience to the command of our Lord Jesus Christ. I would go so far as to say that Christians do not love one another because this is what the Ten Commandments are on about. We don’t read the Bible and love one another. We look at our Lord, and we listen to him, and we love one another because he told us to. (Conversely, when we do not love one another it is because we are ignoring our Lord Jesus Christ.)

Now, people love people from many motivations, such as mother love and so on. But this is ours. Jesus looked us collectively in the eye, he looked the church in the eye, he looks at each and every one of us through the medium of the fellowship of believers and scripture and liturgy, he reaches across the centuries and his message is “I’m talking to you. I am giving you a fresh commandment. Do this. Love one another. As I have loved you, love one another.”

He might as well have said “Look who’s talking.”

And when we look at this person who commands us to love one another, what do we see or whom do we see? We see God. To be more precise, and precision matters here, we see “God as Jesus has revealed God to us.” To quote 2 Corinthians, we see “the light of the glory of God revealed in the face of Jesus Christ.” In John, Jesus asserts, “Whoever sees me has seen the Father.” Also, “I am the truth.” “I am the light,” etc.

If it sounds novel to emphasize the word “I” so much in reading this verse, it is new to me as well. I have not thought about how much this affects the understanding of this pericope. But I think this interpretation is justified by paying very close

attention to the whole story, and to the whole gospel of John.

Jesus wants us to look at who’s talking to us. He wants us to know that this commandment to love comes from one who is from the Father—let there be no doubt about it, this is no new god—but who speaks to us not as one who has come into the world to condemn the world or chastise the world or punish the world, but—unequivocally!—to save us. He wants us to see that the one who is talking to us thus on behalf of the Lord God Almighty is one with the person who loves us so much that—as for example in the context of this story—he was willing to stoop and wash the feet of Judas knowing that Judas was going to use his nice clean feet to walk out the door and betray Jesus to his death.

“As I have loved you, love one another.”

Just like that. Jesus loves us the way he loved Judas. And Peter, who was going to deny knowing him, etc., etc. All those fools gathered that last evening, those men of little faith, Jesus loved them and was about to commission them to continue this salvation ministry forever throughout the world. Jesus loves us with that same sort of love, and the same amount of love, because Jesus loves the world, and loves the world without the world first loving Jesus.

And the reason it works, when it does work, for people to “Look who’s talking” and hear Jesus command us to “love one another,” is because when the Son of God loves us with that sort of love it replaces our fears, even and particularly our fear of God, with the peace of God.

This is the good news: Not that someone else has mastered a difficulty so he feels he can impose the same discipline on us. But that in Christ, through his death and resurrection, God has revealed with singular clarity his love for us, and thereby releases us to obey God’s original command. Love one another, as Jesus has loved you. Amen.