



John 13:31-38
 So That You May Believe: John
 “Love Is The Answer”

Rev. Brian North
 December 24th, 2022
 Christmas Eve

Pray. Well, we are on the eve of another Christmas celebration – another birthday party for Jesus. And here at Rose Hill, we’ve been in a series of sermons for most of the last 10 months in the gospel according to John. And so tonight, we continue in that series, even though the passage I’ll read in a moment doesn’t line up with the birth narrative. In fact, this passage in John I’ll read is part of Jesus’ directives and words of encouragement to the disciples in light of his death that is coming very shortly. So, in our series, we’re near the end of his earthly life, even as we celebrate his birth.

And: That contrast between Easter and Christmas makes me think about the differences in how we celebrate them culturally. For his birth, Christmas is a national holiday that shuts down the country for a day. Our public schools take a couple weeks off around this time. Houses are decorated; There are workplace gift-exchanges and Christmas parties. We spend a ton of money: online spending just on Black Friday alone, topped \$9.1 billion here in the U.S. this year. Then there’s eggnog, fruitcake, candy canes, and other special food. Lastly, there are Christmas movies, TV specials, live productions like the Nutcracker and Snowflake lane, tons of Christmas music about everything from kissing under the mistletoe to Santa baby to baby Jesus. As a cultural event, Christmas is huge.

Compare that to his death and resurrection. Gatherings happen at Easter, though not to the same degree for the most part. There’s the Easter bunny and egg hunts. But that’s kind of about it. No office parties. No gift exchanges. No “Easter wish-lists”. No month-long anticipation (outside of the church). Spring Break for schools sometimes coincides with Easter, but often it doesn’t. We don’t really decorate our houses. No special music outside of the church; rarely Hollywood movies or anything along those lines. The different responses to Christmas and Easter tell us something: we love birthdays and celebrate them joyously; but death and resurrection, we’re not so sure about.

But here’s the thing: **If it weren’t for Jesus’ death on the cross, and his subsequent resurrection, we wouldn’t be paying attention to his birth.**

You and I would not be here tonight if the cross never happened and the tomb hadn't been vacated. His disciples would have disbanded and the movement would have died like every other movement around a possible Messiah. The church never would've begun, and we'd all be at home tonight in undecorated houses, with more money in our bank accounts, looking forward to the rest of our weekend doing whatever it is we'd do tomorrow if Jesus didn't matter and Christmas weren't a thing.

But that's not what happened. And Jesus knew his death was coming. In a general sense, we all know our death is coming. But in tonight's passage, he's talking very specifically about his death, because it's right around the corner. But he also knew his resurrection was coming. And he prepares his disciples for his departure. Part of what he tells them is in this passage we'll read in a moment. It continues his final teaching to his disciples on the night of his last supper, the Passover meal. We've looked at the start of this scene the last couple Sundays, and we'll continue in it for the next few. So, here's what he says in **John 13:31-38**. This is God's word to us tonight, along with the rest of the passages we've read this evening. This is just after Judas Iscariot left the meal, to go betray Jesus into the hands of the authorities...

So, Judas leaves, and then Jesus continues speaking to them as he had been throughout this evening meal, continuing the theme of him leaving them, and the directives and encouragement he's giving them in light of his departure. **And: Jesus gives them a new command, to "love one another" (John 13:34)**. Just as Jesus has loved them, so they are to love one another. It *is* a command – it's not an optional thing; not an "extra" if you feel like it. It's a command. And it's new, not because the idea of loving others never existed before. In fact, we see it in the Old Testament. For instance, Leviticus 19:18 says, "love your neighbor as yourself." So, what's new about it now? **This commandment to love is new because it is based on the new covenant sealed in his own blood, which will be shed on the cross shortly after this conversation here in John.** In other words, the old command was based on law through the Old Covenant God made; This new command is based on God's grace in a new covenant through Jesus.

Peter then pridefully professes his undying and unfailing commitment. It's another example of Peter speaking before he thinks and needing a crowbar to get his foot out of his mouth. We've probably all told someone we'd be there for them, only to end up falling short and letting them down. I've done that with my wife, my kids, friends, and others. You probably have, too. Though not with my wife and kids and friends...but yours. 😊

So, Peter thinks he's all that and a bag of chips, and will be there for Jesus no matter what. But Jesus knows otherwise. He knows the truth. And the truth is, Peter's gonna drop the ball. Three times in the next few hours, Peter will deny even knowing Jesus. Just because Judas has left doesn't mean there aren't problems and even sin in the group. And yet, Jesus loves them.

That's the good news – not only for Peter, but for us as well. As much as we might be like Peter, he loves us anyway. Jesus loves you. He loves me. We've done nothing to deserve his love – in fact, quite the opposite. But Jesus is not deterred. It's why he was born. It's why he died. It's why he was raised from the tomb by his heavenly father.

So, two things to take away from this passage tonight. **The first takeaway is I want to make sure each of us realizes how much Jesus loves us: He loves you so much that he was born for you...and he died for you.** You might not have known that before, you might have heard it but ignored it, you might have willfully turned away from it, you might have known it once but forgotten it...but nothing in your past scares Jesus off, and you are still loved by him. Nothing in your future scares him off, either. The sin that breaks our relationship with God – even the sins of willful disbelief or lazy faith – our sin does not keep him from pursuing us with his love. And His love is the answer to our loneliness, our uncertainty about the future, our uncertainty about eternity, our questions about what it means to be human and how to love our neighbors. Jesus answers them all. We simply confess our need for him and receive him and his love into our lives. You can do that even tonight if you never have before.

The second thing is: How do we respond to this undeserved love? This is a natural question to ask in light of the gift Jesus gives in himself. Like any

gift: We receive it. Tomorrow, or tonight if that's your tradition, you're probably opening gifts that people have given you, and you're going to receive them into your life. Some gifts you'll then put on the shelf or in a drawer, and hardly give a second thought. Hopefully you don't get many gifts like that, and hopefully you don't give many gifts like that, either. I'm praying I'm not giving any to my wife like that...but the moment of reckoning is coming soon and I'll find out if a leaf-blower is what she was hoping for. ☺

And: It's the same with Jesus' love: He invites us to put it to use, not just set it aside. In fact, he commands us to put it to use. "Love one another" he says "as I have loved you." It's *not* a suggestion. Now, the reality is, we see elsewhere that the command to love others goes beyond just loving other disciples of Jesus, but that's the emphasis here as he's gathered with them. And as we love each other – celebrating each other's successes, weeping in each other's losses, encouraging each other in our discipleship to Jesus, raising up the next generation to know his love – as we do all of that, we're living out this command. I know many of you here tonight are a part of the Rose Hill family, but I don't know about all of you. I hope you are in a church community where you can love other disciples and be loved by them as well.

It shouldn't really take a commandment, of course. But, **Jesus knows we're more like Peter than we care to admit, and so he gives it as a command.** And, let's be honest, loving people is hard. I recently shared something I heard a teacher once say about teaching kids and how hard that is. I also once heard a pastor say, and this was about two months after I'd been ordained and was a brand-new pastor, and this other guy was a year or so from retiring...He said, "Pastoring would be great if it weren't for all the people." He meant it humorously, and he was a very good pastor. Had a great name, too: Davey Crocket. Seriously.

But, you don't need to love someone for very long to realize how hard it is to love someone, whether that's a spouse, children, your parents, siblings, co-workers, neighbors, friends you've known since grade school...let alone people you just don't click with very well, or who or completely different

than you. Which, by the way, in that band of 12 disciples was a wide range of people. The point is: It's hard to love people. Yet, Jesus tells us to love others, and he shows us how – from leaving eternity to come to earth and loving us all the way to the cross and the empty tomb. That's his gift to us this Christmas. And, like a gift from under the tree that we set on the shelf: **If we've received Jesus' love, and aren't putting it to use, have we *really* received it?**

So, I hope you know that there's a God in heaven, who's put all of creation into place, who's created you in his image...and that he loves you so much, that he's come in Jesus to demonstrate that love. That's what Christmas is all about, in spite of all that our culture has turned it into. And what matters most, and what makes his birth special, is that Jesus loves you all the way to the cross and the empty tomb in spite of how difficult we are to love. Maybe, like our culture, you don't quite know what to do with his death and resurrection. I say: receive it this Christmas as the gift that it is. And then put that gift to use, loving others like Jesus does, and as he commands us to do as well. Let's pray...Amen.