

The Sign of Discipleship

I will start by saying that the sign of discipleship is Christian Love. However, what is Christian love? For our purpose tonight, here a definition: Christian Love is loving the way God in Christ loves us.

Loving one another in the same way God in Christ loves us is a very high standard to measure up. Therefore, it has been given to us as a new commandment with the premise that God's commandments, more than You shall not...statements, they are life-giving practices.

The events in the narrative of John 13 are very well known to us. The liturgical calendar invites us to focus on the last three days of Holy Week and begins with Maundy Thursday. Maundy comes from the Latin word Mandatum and refers to Jesus's instructions to his disciples. Those instructions are, washing of the feet, communion, and the new commandment to love one another.

Maundy Thursday marks the end of Lent, the 40 days of preparation and invitation to practice The Christian disciplines of prayer, fasting, and good works.

Lutheran liturgical calendar marks Maundy Thursday as the day to celebrate the milestone of First Communion, then, tonight's service will include Grace children celebrating their First Communion milestone.

I have chosen the title of Signs of Discipleship from the last verse of today's Gospel reading: John 13: ³⁵By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another."

The word "signs" is very important in the Gospel of John and has some background in the Old Testament narratives of the books of Exodus and Deuteronomy. In the Gospel of John, "signs" are powerful acts of God in, with, and by Jesus of Nazareth that announce the coming of the Kingdom of God. Such as miracles of healing, casting evil spirits, and walking on the water, transfiguration, etc.

The sign of discipleship according to Jesus is, Christians loving one another. The best way to talk, reflect, and honor this commandment is by being attentive to what Jesus has done.

Love as a concept seems abstract but love as an action is less difficult to grasp. Jesus love for his disciples was expressed in terms of humble servanthood, like washing of the feet, and in terms of redemptive self-sacrifice in the cross for all humankind.

Then, I will share two stories of Christian love that are examples, signs of discipleship and the coming of the kingdom of God, those acts of Christian love have been done by people like you and to people like us.

The first story is about my great-grandmother Julia, to whom I had the blessings to know very well, she lived until her mid 90's. She was a widow who grew up in rural Mexico in a hard-

working family of farmers. Julia's house was in what we will call a prime real estate spot in the village, a few steps of the central plaza, the weekend public gathering for all the people of the village. Julia decided to donate a part of her parcel to the church for a chapel.

The second story is about a common religious practice I witnessed in the same village in my childhood. It is the practice of fulfilling a promise – in Spanish “pagar una manda.” A “manda” is a promise a person intends to fulfill as a sign of devotion to a saint, the virgin, and to God. Fulfilling a promise consisted of changing ordinary clothing for religious clothing like this Alb I am wearing right now. The person then, walked through the whole village knocking doors and asking for charity, as a sign of humility. They would accept anything, from food, water, clothing, chickens, and money. The proceedings will be used for a pilgrimage to a dedicated chapel or cathedral to the saint, virgin, or Christ, they have made the promise. Pilgrims would use part of the proceedings for the poor too.

In both examples of Christian love, there is a paradox in Christian love, it is both giving and receiving. Human nature and Christ example would incline us to give rather than receiving, though love for one another is always both, even when we give in all humility with no intention to receive something in exchange.

My great-grandmother Julia gave a prime real estate plot of land to build the villages' chapel. That chapel was besides her own house, and she could go worship and nurture her faith. But that gift nurtured her family's faith too, in fact the whole community had a place to worship. Later, I, a great-grandson would learn the story of Jesus and celebrated Holy Week in that chapel. An act of Christian love, a sign of discipleship has become a sign of the coming of the Kingdom of God for at least 4 generations.

The promise keepers that ask for charity as a sign of devotion and gratitude receive donations in humility, they might have need for nothing, though in their act of Christian love sharing their devotion and humbling themselves becomes a sign of discipleship and coming of the Kingdom of God. Then again, the paradox of Christian love, the sign of Christian discipleship is showed in the giving and receiving.

Let today us celebrate Jesus new lifegiving commandment as a sign of Christian love and the coming of the kingdom of God...let us continue loving one another.

Amen.

**Grace Lutheran Church
Hendersonville, North Carolina
Maundy Thursday 2022
Rev. Alfredo M. Oviedo**