



Grace Covenant Presbyterian Church
Asheville, North Carolina
Rev. Samantha Gonzalez-Block
Sunday, May, 19th, 2019
Confirmation Sunday
Sermon: "Leap of Faith"
Psalm 148
John 13:31-35

It was a night like none other. A young Jesus sits beside his friends at table to share a Passover meal. He knows it will be his last.

As they reminisce about their adventures and misadventures together over food and wine, Jesus takes out a basin and fills it with water. Like a servant, he begins to wash each disciple's feet. They are shocked to see him do this – this is not befitting of their Lord. He says to them: "Just as I have washed your feet, you also should wash one another's feet."

Then he returns to the table and declares that he is to be betrayed – and his betrayer is among them. "Do quickly what you have to do," he says to Judas. His disciples are bewildered. Judas is stunned. His betrayer escapes into the night – leaving Jesus to share some final words before his impending arrest.

Jesus could have spoken to his friends about anything at that moment. In a time so fraught with betrayal and confusion, he could have asked them to devise a quick escape route or defense strategy; he could have warned them in anger to never betray him - as his friend Judas did; he could have encouraged them to be cautious and careful in the dangerous days ahead; he could have begged them to please tell his story long after he is gone.

Instead, Jesus uses this precious time to speak to them about - love. He gifts them a new commandment: "love one another, just as I have loved you," he says.

His words seem almost out of place, out of context. *Why now* in this devastating hour – with the authorities ready to retrieve him - does he take time to stop and speak of love?

Surely, his timing must be significant, *right*? It leaves us wondering... what is it that Jesus so desperately wants us to understand about love, about the nature of discipleship, about what our faith truly requires?

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When it comes to Christian love, we have to admit the Church has done a top-notch job of watering it down. We people of faith, trickle the word love through nearly every worship service, hymn, prayer, and sacrament. *Love is patient and love is kind...*

We are quick to speak of love as something easy and comfortable, sustainable and satisfying. Discipleship requires little more than a heart ready to give and receive love. And church can become a place- where we gather to feel at ease – held safely in that love – and held back from doing anything more radical than clinging tight to our faith in Christ.

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The late Christian blogger and author, Rachel Held Evans (who tragically passed away just two weeks ago) once wrote about our Christian tendency here in America to feel satisfied with watered down versions of discipleship – especially if it means attracting more young people to church. Her article was entitled: “Want Millennials Back in the pews? Stop trying to make church ‘cool’.”

In it, she speaks about how churches are becoming so concerned with the growing number of young Christians who are no longer affiliated, that they will stop at nothing to lure them back into the pews. The focus is not on ministry, but on re-branding: “let’s get cooler music, hipper worship, edgier programming, impressive technology.”

Some churches produce concert-style services with bright blue-green-yellow-lights and a pastor sporting leather pants, some churches offer free Easter giveaways (tablet computers, TVs and even the grand prize of a new car).

Rachel Held Evans explains that these wildly creative and seemingly desperate attempts can sometimes fall flat with their target audience. Studies have found that 67 percent of Millennials actually prefer a more “classic” feeling church over a “trendy” one. But more importantly, young people are far more interested in the ‘heart’ of a place – over its ‘cool’ exterior.

It is not that Millennials are disillusioned by Christianity itself, she shares, but rather by any “slick or shallow” expression of it. Young people do not want to be part of a faith group more interested in *marketing* Jesus than in actually *following* Him.†

This wisdom reminds us that no person of faith should ever settle for less. We should always be hungry to experience and embody radical and authentic discipleship: a church community willing to risk everything in order to boldly welcome and boundlessly love,
a faith family willing to risk everything in order to follow Jesus no matter the cost.

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When we encounter this morning's text, we are reminded that Jesus wants this for us as well. "Little children," he says to his disciples, "I am with you only a little longer."

There is urgency in this moment.

Jesus calls his disciples (who are his peers and friends) "little children," as if to remind them that their faith is still young, naïve and unfinished.

By now, they think they have already experienced all there is to know about the depth and nature of Christ's love (through watching him heal, teach and preach) but they have only scratched the surface.

Christ's love has always been leading them toward something grander, bolder and more devastating...to the foot of the cross.

Jesus' ministry is not finished without this ultimate expression of love: this sacrifice of Himself for our sake and for the world.

Perhaps then, it is no accident that Jesus chooses this moment, where everything is hanging in the balance, where death is closing in, where betrayal and denial surround him, to speak to his disciples about this commandment: to love one another.

To love - not despite the brokenness around them, but because of it.

Here, when Christ's pain is most raw and real, he turns to us, and asks if we have what it takes to truly follow him - not because this promises a smoother road or a more tender outcome, but because God sees in us - dear disciples to be trusted with this most holy work - to bring about healing, and wholeness, and God's kingdom to an aching and divided world.

The love Jesus commands us to share requires hard work, trust and vulnerability.

It can never be easy, finished or watered down.

It is a dangerous and sacrificial life calling - and it always leads us closer to the cross.

When we say we follow Jesus, we commit ourselves to leaping into our faith. We must become willing to stop at nothing - to carry out the loving work of Jesus:

to change inhumane systems of power,
to speak out for justice for the oppressed,
to welcome in the rejected and despised,
to extend compassion to the enemy,
to recognize all people as fellow children of God.

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This year's Confirmation Class has spent a semester leaping into their faith - taking time to explore what it means to be Christ's faithful disciples and considering what they authentically believe about God and Jesus and the Church Universal.

These days, it can be hard for young people to maintain faith - with so many Christians spouting divisive things on the news and with threats of climate change and school gun violence so often on their minds...

it is difficult to trust a world that seems to use faith as a weapon and continues dismiss young people when they cry out for change.

Throughout the Confirmation class, my co-teachers and I have been in awe of this group of eight. Their dedication each week to asking hard questions about how they as Christians can make the world a more equitable and accepting place blew us away. They were unapologetically hungry to understand what it means to be beacons of God's love in the midst of a broken world.

Here at Grace Covenant, since many of them were little children, they have been taught to question and wonder, and now as teenagers writing their Statements of Faith, they are finding answers that seem to sing out Christ's call to be disciples willing to love and serve with abandon.

Christel writes: "I step into my position as a Christian in this world by fighting for the rights of all of God's creations and speaking for those who have no voice."

Zeke says: "One of my roles as a Christian is to help people in every way possible and to spread the word of God, so that people can see God's light and understand how you are never truly alone."

William says: "I want to help those in need - for example, "minorities, the LGBTQ community, and people of color who are being treated differently just because of qualities that don't affect them as a person."

Mary Elizabeth puts it this way: "As a Christian, I believe I am called to fight for justice, just as Jesus did. This calling allows me to carry my faith to protests, rallies, and discussions concerning issues, such as gun violence, white supremacy, mass incarceration, and more."

Some of our youth remind us of our shared calling and connection.

Ruby says: "Whenever I see beauty in the world, be it flowers or magnificent trees standing tall, I am reminded of the Holy Spirit blanketing this Earth and keeping everything connected in an intricate web that tells the story of life: cocooning us in a warm, loving embrace, reminding us that we are looked after and loved.

Elliot writes: I think of church as a way for people to connect to others and to God – it's a place for people to feel loved and accepted."

Frances says: "As Christians, we are called to care for the world and to make changes for the better. We are allowed to make mistakes and take a misstep, but our intentions must be to spread love. We must love our neighbor through connection. For when we do, we are taking a step forward in loving our world and caring for all."

And Christian encapsulates all of this when he says: "As Christians, we are called to be kind, to share peace, and to be loving."

Our young people teach us to take our faith out from the shallow end, and to dive in deep: to hear Jesus' call to love as a life-long commandment - one that offers no shortcuts or guarantees, only the belief that radical transformation is possible - even in moments – *especially* in moments - of immense brokenness.

Friends, God calls us to be a community of faith always engaged in caring for each other and the world – no matter the cost.

³⁵By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.” Jesus says.

May we dare to leap into our faith together.
May we boldly follow Christ wherever he leads us.
And may we generously share God's profound love every step of the way.

ⁱ Rachel Held Evans. [Want millennials back in the pews? Stop trying to make church 'cool'](#). The Washington Post. April 30, 2015