



Clarity of Identity

A Vibrant Together Series
Presbytery of Tropical Florida

Clarity of Identity 2019

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Vibrant Together Timeline





Introduction

Dear Congregational Leader,

In November of 2018, the Presbytery adopted a Plan for Ministry that included spending six-month segments of time considering the marks of ecclesial health for Vibrant Christ-Centered Communities. For each six-month segment there is also a Bible Study component.

Contained here is the Bible Study and Discussion materials for our first six-month segment focusing on Clarity of Identity.

The material is offered in three units that coordinate with the 3rd, 4th, and 5th Sundays of Easter on the liturgical calendar for 2019. The Acts text and the Gospel text for each of those weeks is utilized in the materials.

There is great latitude in how one might use this material. It could be used in adult education. It could be used by the session. It could be used in small group ministry. It could be used as a stand-alone series that invites leaders and members of a congregation to continue the conversation around clarity of identity.

For congregations that have participated in the first workshop on Clarity of Identity, you will notice some connections. For those who have yet to experience that workshop, this material will inform the discussion when that does take place. We will be offering more opportunities for the Clarity of Identity Workshop. Watch for dates and/or call the Presbytery Center to set up an opportunity for your congregation.

A word about the background material used to prepare this resource. I relied heavily on "Connections: A Lectionary Commentary for Preaching and Worship." I highly commend this new resource to you. It is published by Westminster John Knox.

It is my prayer that this material, however you choose to use it, will come as a blessing to our becoming Vibrant Together.

In Christ,
Rev. Dr. Daris Bultena





Clarity of Identity 2019

Bible Study – Unit 1

Based on the Revised Common Lectionary for May 5, 2019

First Reading: Acts 9:1-20
and Gospel Reading: John 21:1-19
3rd Sunday of Easter, Year C

SECTION ONE: FIRST READING

Acts 9:1-20

¹Meanwhile Saul, still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord, went to the high priest ²and asked him for letters to the synagogues at Damascus, so that if he found any who belonged to the Way, men or women, he might bring them bound to Jerusalem. ³Now as he was going along and approaching Damascus, suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him. ⁴He fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to him, "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?" ⁵He asked, "Who are you, Lord?" The reply came, "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting. ⁶But get up and enter the city, and you will be told what you are to do." ⁷The men who were traveling with him stood speechless because they heard the voice but saw no one. ⁸Saul got up from the ground, and though his eyes were open, he could see nothing; so they led him by the hand and brought him into Damascus. ⁹For three days he was without sight, and neither ate nor drank.

¹⁰Now there was a disciple in Damascus named Ananias. The Lord said to him in a vision, "Ananias." He answered, "Here I am, Lord." ¹¹The Lord said to him, "Get up and go to the street called Straight, and at the house of Judas look for a man of Tarsus named Saul. At this moment he is praying, ¹²and he has seen in a vision a man named Ananias come in and lay his hands on him so that he might regain his sight." ¹³But Ananias answered, "Lord, I have heard from many about this man, how much evil he has done to your saints in Jerusalem; ¹⁴and here he has authority from the chief priests to bind all who invoke your name." ¹⁵But the Lord said to him, "Go, for he is an instrument whom I have chosen to bring my name before Gentiles and kings and before the people of Israel; ¹⁶I myself will show him how much he must suffer for the sake of my name." ¹⁷So Ananias went and entered the house. He laid his hands on Saul and said, "Brother Saul, the Lord Jesus, who appeared to you on your way here, has sent me so that you may regain your sight and be filled with the Holy Spirit." ¹⁸And immediately something like

scales fell from his eyes, and his sight was restored. Then he got up and was baptized, ¹⁹and after taking some food, he regained his strength.

For several days he was with the disciples in Damascus, ²⁰and immediately he began to proclaim Jesus in the synagogues, saying, "He is the Son of God."

DISCOVERY: Exploring the Text

The story of the conversion of Saul spotlights a central figure: Jesus. Jesus is the one who meets and interrupts Saul's life and the pathway Saul had been taking. As Saul is on his way, Jesus meets him and announces, "I am Jesus." Jesus instructs Saul. Jesus instructs Ananias. Ananias responds in submission and obedience to the call of Jesus even though Saul's reputation is well known to followers of Jesus.

The conversion of Saul requires the transformative work of Ananias and the members of the Christian faith community. Saul was a threat. Ananias voiced his caution, but he moved forward in obedience and faithfulness. He was open to changing his views about Saul. Saul remained with the disciples in the coming days (see v. 19). Those disciples had shifted their view and helped in the formation of Saul. Evidence of that transformation is seen in the testimony that concludes the passage: *"...and immediately he began to proclaim Jesus in the synagogues, saying, 'He is the Son of God.'"*

This key role played by the community in the conversion and formation of Saul, becomes the foundational linking for Saul between his experience on the Damascus road and his vocational identity. Saul's encounter with Jesus and then his encounter with the Christian community enabled him to claim and understand the new purpose of his life. In the Christian community his past is put into perspective and his future is opened to him.

While Saul experiences conversion, so too does both the Christian community and Ananias in their acceptance of this one who had done "much evil." In response to Ananias' challenge to the Lord, we hear: (V.15) *But the Lord said to him, "Go for he is an instrument whom I have chosen to bring my name before Gentiles and kings and before the people of Israel."* Note the dual call of Saul to "the people of Israel" and to "Gentiles and kings." This is a central message in Luke's Acts—that the growth of the Gospel goes beyond those of Jewish origin and to the whole of humanity.

EXPLORATION: Discovering Our Connections



In the conversion of Saul, it is the presence of Jesus that is transformative for Saul and insightfully challenging for Ananias. How is the presence of Jesus making things new in your life and in your congregation?



In the context of the Christian community, Saul's past is put into perspective, he grows in his understanding of his encounter with Jesus on the road, and his future is opened up for him as a disciple. Is "opening up the future" the purpose of the church? How is that lived out in your context? Where have you seen this most operative?



If Saul's calling is to both "the people of Israel" and to "Gentiles and kings," then how do we understand what becomes a dual calling for us in the church? Our calling may be framed in the dual nature of ministry to "those who are in" (our members) and "those who are beyond" (our neighbors) the church? Does ministry to both "those who are in" and "those who are beyond" require similar or dissimilar purposes? In what ways might there be similar purposes? In what ways might there be distinct purposes?



How does identity for a congregation take shape given a dual understanding of ministry to "those who are in" and "those who are beyond" the church? What are the intersections of identity when considering both of these understandings of ministry?



For personal reflection: What happens when we see the light? How have we encountered Jesus on the road? How has the community in Christ shaped us and given us sight for our purpose?

SECTION TWO: GOSPEL READING

John 21:1-19

¹After these things Jesus showed himself again to the disciples by the Sea of Tiberias; and he showed himself in this way. ²Gathered there together were Simon Peter, Thomas called the Twin, Nathanael of Cana in Galilee, the sons of Zebedee, and two others of his disciples. ³Simon Peter said to them, "I am going fishing." They said to him, "We will go with you." They went out and got into the boat, but that night they caught nothing.

⁴Just after daybreak, Jesus stood on the beach; but the disciples did not know that it was Jesus. ⁵Jesus said to them, "Children, you have no fish, have you?" They answered him, "No." ⁶He said to them, "Cast the net to the right side of the boat, and you will find some." So they cast it, and now they were not able to haul it in because there were so many fish. ⁷That disciple whom Jesus loved said to Peter, "It is the Lord!" When Simon Peter heard that it was the Lord, he put on some clothes, for he was naked, and jumped into the sea. ⁸But the other disciples came in the boat, dragging the net full of fish, for they were not far from the land, only about a hundred yards off.

⁹When they had gone ashore, they saw a charcoal fire there, with fish on it, and bread. ¹⁰Jesus said to them, "Bring some of the fish that you have just caught." ¹¹So Simon Peter went aboard and hauled the net ashore, full of large fish, a hundred fifty-three of them; and though there were so many, the net was not torn. ¹²Jesus said to them, "Come and have breakfast." Now none of the disciples dared to ask him, "Who are you?" because they knew it was the Lord. ¹³Jesus came and took the bread and gave it to them and did the same with the fish. ¹⁴This was now the third time that Jesus appeared to the disciples after he was raised from the dead.

¹⁵When they had finished breakfast, Jesus said to Simon Peter, "Simon son of John, do you love me more than these?" He said to him, "Yes, Lord; you know that I love you." Jesus said to him, "Feed my lambs." ¹⁶A second time he said to him, "Simon son of John, do you love me?" He said to him, "Yes, Lord; you know that I love you." Jesus said to him, "Tend my sheep." ¹⁷He said to him the third time, "Simon son of John, do you love me?" Peter felt hurt because he said to him the third time, "Do you love me?" And he said to him, "Lord, you know everything; you know that I love you." Jesus said to him, "Feed my sheep. ¹⁸Very truly, I tell you, when you were younger, you used to fasten your own belt and to go wherever you wished. But when you grow old, you will stretch out your hands, and someone else will fasten a belt around you and take you where you do not wish to go." ¹⁹(He said this to indicate the kind of death by which he would glorify God.) After this he said to him, "Follow me."

DISCOVERY: Exploring the Text

This chapter of the Gospel of John functions as a post script. Chapter 20 concludes with verses that shape an ending of the gospel. Chapter 21 may be a later addition as stylistically there are differences that point beyond the authorship of John's Gospel. While the questions of

authorship and how this chapter became attached to the Gospel of John are interesting, they are of little consequence in terms of the function of the chapter in the whole of the gospel story.

This chapter is an epilogue to John and tells the story of a post-resurrection experience. Post resurrection experiences of Jesus have one primary role—they bear witness to the reality that Jesus is alive—Christ IS Risen! And it follows that this bears witness to the God of the living and our clarity that we serve a living God.

As the story opens, Peter, and what would constitute a voting majority of the disciples, are gathered together. Peter indicates that he is going fishing, and the rest join the endeavor. They catch nothing after a night of labor. At daybreak they engage in a long-distance conversation with one on the shore who invites them to cast their nets on the other side of the boat. The haul of fish is so great that they struggle. It is at this point that “the disciple whom Jesus loved” somehow recognizes that it is Jesus on the shore.

The story extends the view of God as the Shepherd (Psalm 23) and Jesus as the Good Shepherd (John 10). Here Jesus continues as the Good Shepherd who gathers his flock anew and feeds them (with both literal food and spiritual nourishment). Part of the richness of the story is the direct encounter with the one who denied Jesus three times. The three denials correspond to the three questions and commands of Jesus to Peter. The question about love comes before each command.

Earlier in John’s gospel we hear Jesus connect love for him with love for one another. Such love for Jesus is made manifest in the way the followers of Jesus feed, tend, and continue to feed the sheep of the Good Shepherd. The final words of Jesus to Peter echo back to his first words to Peter: “Follow me.”

EXPLORATION: Discovering Our Connections



If the function of a post-resurrection experience is to point to Jesus being alive, then what does being “alive” look like for us? In our individual faith journey? For our congregation?



Considering what your congregation does, explore these questions: Are we casting our nets on only one side of the boat? Where should we cast our nets next? Where should we not cast our nets or where should we stop casting our nets?



As you think about your identity as a congregation and as a follower of Christ, how does love manifest itself? F-1.0301 of the Book of Order says: *The Church is to be a community of love, where sin is forgiven, reconciliation is accomplished, and the dividing walls of hostility are torn down.* How is this reflected in the identity of your congregation?



The Presbytery of Tropical Florida has said that a Vibrant Christ-Centered community builds relationships, has spiritual depth, and is missional. What does following Jesus look like today in terms of building relationships? ...having spiritual depth? ...being missional?



Examine the mission/vision statement of your congregation. Does what you say you will do and be, actually connect with what is happening and who you are? Is there a direct link between the mission/vision statement and the programs undertaken by the congregation? How is this evident?



Clarity of Identity 2019

Bible Study – Unit 2

Based on the Revised Common Lectionary for May 12, 2019

First Reading: Acts 9:36-43
and Gospel Reading: John 10:22-30
4th Sunday of Easter, Year C

SECTION ONE: FIRST READING

Acts 9:36-43

³⁶Now in Joppa there was a disciple whose name was Tabitha, which in Greek is Dorcas. She was devoted to good works and acts of charity. ³⁷At that time she became ill and died. When they had washed her, they laid her in a room upstairs. ³⁸Since Lydda was near Joppa, the disciples, who heard that Peter was there, sent two men to him with the request, "Please come to us without delay." ³⁹So Peter got up and went with them; and when he arrived, they took him to the room upstairs. All the widows stood beside him, weeping and showing tunics and other clothing that Dorcas had made while she was with them. ⁴⁰Peter put all of them outside, and then he knelt down and prayed. He turned to the body and said, "Tabitha, get up." Then she opened her eyes, and seeing Peter, she sat up. ⁴¹He gave her his hand and helped her up. Then calling the saints and widows, he showed her to be alive. ⁴²This became known throughout Joppa, and many believed in the Lord. ⁴³Meanwhile he stayed in Joppa for some time with a certain Simon, a tanner.

DISCOVERY: Exploring the Text

Dorcas (Greek, meaning gazelle) or Tabitha (Aramaic) is not only designated as a saintly, good-deed-doing woman, but also she is designated as a disciple. The significance of this title's attachment to her should not be overlooked in the male-dominated context of Luke-Acts. The text tells us not only what happens in the immediate (she becomes ill and dies), but also of the societal impact that Dorcas has had for her region (she was devoted to good works and acts of charity). The magnitude of her impact is demonstrated by those who press in on Peter at his arrival, as they display the clothing, tunics and other items she had produced.

Those that Dorcas served through her discipleship are among the most vulnerable—the widows. The text demonstrates that she has attended to the physical/financial needs as well as been in an on-going relationship with those most at risk.

The story resembles the raising of Jairus' daughter (see Mark 5:21-43; Mt. 9:18-26; Lk 8:40-56). This intentional resemblance suggests that first Jesus, and now Peter, and then other disciples along with the whole of the Church are being pulled into a new reality where death is not viewed as ultimate or final. Dorcas' discipleship is so needed by her community—so much so that she is raised to continue in ministry. Her life of discipleship brings hope in the story for those who are the most vulnerable.

Peter is invited with the words: *"Please come to us without delay."* Like Jairus' daughter, there is an urgency at hand. Dorcas' community is hopeful that Peter can bring about an outcome that will be of positive benefit. The story shows us again a community that points to resurrection hope in a God who transcends death and reaches beyond earthly margins.

EXPLORATION: Discovering Our Connections



Dorcas' ministry changed the landscape of the Joppa community by her care and provision of the widows. Were you to take a survey of your own context as a congregation, how have you done with caring for the "widows" in your community? Understanding the "widows" to be the most vulnerable, how would you describe the need of such constituencies in your neighborhood? What does your church understand as its responsibility to those constituencies?



The call to action of Peter in the story is a resounding, "Rise" (literally, "Tabitha, get up.") Site several examples in your congregation and community where God has used you and/or your congregation "to raise up" that which needed to be resurrected. If you have a difficulty coming up with examples, then look deeper and name what you see (because it is there—the missional God is continually bringing about resurrection).



Tabitha has, to frame it after the manner of John 21, heard the voice of Jesus and fed his sheep as a way of following him. In 2019, there is an invitation from the Presbyterian Mission Agency to be a Matthew 25 church by placing emphasis on serving the poor, confronting racism, and seeking to be vital congregations. How is your ministry as a congregation aligned with this call to action by the Presbyterian Mission Agency? What part or parts of that are reflected in your congregation's understanding of its identity?



In the Church, God keeps raising up Tabitha (metaphorically) again and again because her work is too important to die. Is Tabitha alive in your congregation? How might you help her to rise? Where might she need a fresh breath of life?



The congregation in Joppa were together (*"All the widows stood beside him, weeping and showing tunics and other clothing that Dorcas had made while she was with them."* V.39). One can infer that not only did they weep together, but they served each other, and were in profound relationship. As a Presbytery we have said being vibrant involves 1. building relationships, 2. having spiritual depth, and 3. being missional. Discuss how you see each of these three features in your life as a congregation.

SECTION TWO: GOSPEL READING

John 10:22-30

²²At that time the festival of the Dedication took place in Jerusalem. It was winter, ²³and Jesus was walking in the temple, in the portico of Solomon. ²⁴So the Jews gathered around him and said to him, "How long will you keep us in suspense? If you are the Messiah, tell us plainly." ²⁵Jesus answered, "I have told you, and you do not believe. The works that I do in my Father's name testify to me; ²⁶but you do not believe, because you do not belong to my sheep. ²⁷My sheep hear my voice. I know them, and they follow me. ²⁸I give them eternal life, and they will never perish. No one will snatch them out of my hand. ²⁹What my Father has given me is greater than all else, and no one can snatch it out of the Father's hand. ³⁰The Father and I are one."

DISCOVERY: Exploring the Text

In all three years of the Revised Common Lectionary, the 4th Sunday of Easter is "The Good Shepherd Sunday." On the 4th Sunday the Gospel Lesson always is drawn from John 10. This text continues that theme of Jesus as the Good Shepherd. The Psalm for the day is the 23rd and the oneness indicated in verse 30 draws a rich connection between God as the Shepherd in Psalm 23 and Jesus as the Good Shepherd in John 10.

This connection extends well beyond the symbolism of a shepherd, and it points to the nature of the work of Jesus and the work of God the Parent – there is more than a symmetry to that work – there is oneness between the work/action/movement of God and the work/action/movement of Jesus. This should be understood as a well-defined unity of purpose between the God of Creation and the Jesus of the Gospel.

In these verses and for this chapter of John, time and placement are significant. Jesus is walking with his disciples in the temple in the portico of Solomon during the Festival of Dedication. We know this festival as Hanukkah. The festival commemorates the rededication of the altar in the temple by Judas Maccabeus in 164 BCE after its desecration by Antiochus IV when he erected an image of Zeus there. (See the Deuterocanonical Book* I Maccabees 4:36-61.)

The desecrated altar was taken down, stone-by-stone; a new altar was put up, stone-by-stone, and then dedicated. In John's technique, the setting of these verses should not be lost by the reader. John would invite the reader to consider how, stone-by-stone, Jesus is erecting a new way of being in relationship with God that invites belief in the work of salvation which God demonstrates in the cross event.

In plain speak, the text tells us who Jesus is (something continually requested in the gospels), and as one continues to read the rest of the story, we see that lived out in the actions of Jesus. This Jesus, of John's Gospel, will wash the disciples' feet, and lay down his life in full demonstration of love. It is a love that forms the foundation of the "new commandment" (John 13:34).

EXPLORATION: Discovering Our Connections



This text, along with the whole of Chapter 10 in John's Gospel, draws a clear line of connection (unity of purpose) between Jesus and God. John frames that unity in terms of "oneness" between Jesus and God. How directly do you understand your purpose (your identity) as being in alignment with God? Cite examples of where there is alignment and where there is not?



Considering the question above, now consider this in terms of your congregation. How directly do you understand your congregation's purpose (identity) as being in alignment with God? Cite examples of where there is alignment and where there is not?



Considering the stone-by-stone rebuilding of the altar in the temple that was commemorated by the Festival of Dedication, think about your congregation's purpose and actions:

- What stones need to be dismantled, replace or supplanted?
- What stones are profane now?
- What dedication needs to take place?
- How might this process of reworking the stones be approached as more of a festival opportunity than a necessary task? What difference might that make?



In your own life and in the church, are you and the church "one with Christ?" What difference does that make?

** Deuterocanonical Books – sometimes referred to as Apocryphal Books are that Scripture-like literature which was not included in our canon (meaning a set of texts) of scriptures that comprise the Old and New Testaments. They consist of 15 books that were often found in Greek versions of Hebrew Scriptures (the Old Testament). Many of the early Church Fathers quoted most of the books as authoritative Scripture. The cannon of Scripture as we have it today was set by the 5th Century. Eastern Orthodox and Roman Catholic canons of Scripture vary slightly from the 66 books we know as Holy Scripture. As an example, a number of the Deuterocanonical books are included in Roman Catholic canon of Scripture.*



Clarity of Identity 2019

Bible Study – Unit 3

Based on the Revised Common Lectionary for May 19, 2019

First Reading: Acts 11:1-18
and Gospel Reading: John 13:31-35
5th Sunday of Easter, Year C

SECTION ONE: FIRST READING

Acts 11:1-18

¹Now the apostles and the believers who were in Judea heard that the Gentiles had also accepted the word of God. ²So when Peter went up to Jerusalem, the circumcised believers criticized him, ³saying, "Why did you go to uncircumcised men and eat with them?" ⁴Then Peter began to explain it to them, step by step, saying, ⁵"I was in the city of Joppa praying, and in a trance I saw a vision. There was something like a large sheet coming down from heaven, being lowered by its four corners; and it came close to me. ⁶As I looked at it closely I saw four-footed animals, beasts of prey, reptiles, and birds of the air. ⁷I also heard a voice saying to me, 'Get up, Peter; kill and eat.' ⁸But I replied, 'By no means, Lord; for nothing profane or unclean has ever entered my mouth.' ⁹But a second time the voice answered from heaven, 'What God has made clean, you must not call profane.' ¹⁰This happened three times; then everything was pulled up again to heaven. ¹¹At that very moment three men, sent to me from Caesarea, arrived at the house where we were. ¹²The Spirit told me to go with them and not to make a distinction between them and us. These six brothers also accompanied me, and we entered the man's house. ¹³He told us how he had seen the angel standing in his house and saying, 'Send to Joppa and bring Simon, who is called Peter; ¹⁴he will give you a message by which you and your entire household will be saved.' ¹⁵And as I began to speak, the Holy Spirit fell upon them just as it had upon us at the beginning. ¹⁶And I remembered the word of the Lord, how he had said, 'John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit.' ¹⁷If then God gave them the same gift that he gave us when we believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I that I could hinder God?" ¹⁸When they heard this, they were silenced. And they praised God, saying, "Then God has given even to the Gentiles the repentance that leads to life."

DISCOVERY: Exploring the Text

This is the story of the emerging church sorting through its roots and relationships. The church, rooted in Judaism, is confronted by the reality of Gentile believers. What will the church do? Will it welcome these new believers by requiring that they conform to rules and regulations that guide historic members? Will the church bend and shape itself to welcome the newcomers and thereby shift its own self-understanding of priorities and practices? Such issues are alive and well in the emerging church today!

The established church in Jerusalem, is expressing concern (and inviting correction) for Peter and the choices he has made. “Why did you go to the uncircumcised men and eat with them?” (v.4). The concern is that Peter has lost perspective and is now acting outside the established boundaries. His association with the unclean brings into question his status among the apostles and believers.

The substance of the text accounts Peter’s testimony to the established church of what he has experienced and been given as the vision for what God is doing. Peter’s testimony opened the eyes of the established church to a new way of seeing God’s work in their midst. Peter, along with his companions in the established church, had to rethink the importance of certain requirements in order to accommodate the emerging church.

The text may also be understood as telling the story of conversion. Gentiles are converted. The account in Acts 11 is significant enough that the issue is again in focus in Acts 15. The conversion of Gentiles to be followers of Christ also becomes a conversion of the followers of Christ who are centered in Judaism. Conversion of the Gentiles becomes a conversion, of sorts, for the whole of the Church.

Framed another way, this text in Acts 11 addresses the question of who is in and who is out when it comes to being followers of Christ. With Peter’s testimony and account of God’s revelation and actions, the circle has just been drawn in such a way that more are in than were previously. The role and posture of the leaders in the Jerusalem church should not be overlooked. While initially they were questioning, yet they listened, remained open, and then allowed their viewpoints to be transformed by the witness they encountered.

EXPLORATION: Discovering Our Connections



Seeing this text as telling the story of the emerging church, what observations, perspectives and questions are raised if we see our own context as that of the emerging church:

- What is foundational?
- What is essential? Fundamental?
- What needs to be retained at all cost?
- What needs to be let go?
- What is negotiable? And, what is non-negotiable in the life of your congregation, and why?



Who are the “unclean” in our neighborhoods? How is God already present with them and inviting us to join God in meeting these neighbors? (This question is at the heart of the central understanding of what it means to be missional.)



Peter’s question in Acts 11:17 is paramount. “...who was I that I could hinder God?” What might we be hindering? How is your congregations’ purpose/clarity of identity functioning in such a way that the Gospel is unhindered in your neighborhood?



Peter’s testimony opened the church leaders up to see that God was doing something beyond their initial view. What testimony or stories have functioned that way for you? For your congregation? For your larger community? What have you learned? What story stands out as THE story that widens God’s purpose for your church in your context and frames a clarity of identity?

SECTION TWO: GOSPEL READING

John 13:31-35

³¹When he had gone out, Jesus said, "Now the Son of Man has been glorified, and God has been glorified in him. ³²If God has been glorified in him, God will also glorify him in himself and will glorify him at once. ³³Little children, I am with you only a little longer. You will look for me; and as I said to the Jews so now I say to you, 'Where I am going, you cannot come.' ³⁴I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. ³⁵By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another."

DISCOVERY: Exploring the Text

This passage begins right after Judas has gone out. It is the beginning of the Farewell Discourse* of John that extends through Chapter 17. Farewell discourses follow a pattern that includes gathering those closest, announcement of imminent departure, and instructions/commandments for those who remain. These verses contain a glimpse of this pattern and point to what will follow in Chapters 14-17.

The departure from this pattern is the initial statement found in this passage about glorification. The tense of Jesus' statement is significant—it is a mixture of past, present, and future tense: "...has been glorified..."

The "new commandment" Jesus gives to the disciples to love brings into focus the whole of the commandments. The centrality of love is essential in the immediate and for the long haul. In the immediate the disciples will confront issues of fear and anxiety that will easily overshadow the centrality of love. Fear and anxiety will pull the disciples apart at a time when they will most need the centrality of love.

The commandment to love has a beautiful facet that makes it astounding by nature. It is simple without being simplistic. It is simple enough for anyone to take in, and yet it has a complexity that invites infinite opportunities and challenges in living it out. The very nature of the commandment shifts one on the axis from what one believes to how one behaves.

EXPLORATION: Discovering Our Connections



"...love one another. Just as I have loved you..." Reflect on how you see that going for you? How might you amplify this in your daily practice, relationships, and encounters with others?



Consider your congregation. How central is the love command in your congregation? What evidence do you see?

AND

How central is the love command for your congregation as it serves in the immediate neighborhood? What evidence do you see?



How far will you go for those in the pew next to you? How far will you go for those you see beyond the parking lot? Where are the differences? What do those differences tell you about your congregation's identity/purpose?



If anxiety and fear cause people to pull apart while love causes people to draw together, then consider how the role of anxiety/fear over love is operative for the disciples? For you? For your congregation? For the leadership in your congregation?



In looking at the text it was said: "The very nature of the commandment shifts one on the axis from what one believes to how one behaves." That sentence captures a shift in the formation of Christian community during the last half century or so. Previously newcomers were invited to believe in such a way that it changed their behaviors which in turn made it possible for them to belong to a community of faith. More operative now, newcomers are invited to belong to a community of faith, and this belonging will shift behavior which will also then ultimately shift belief.

- How do you see community being formed in your congregation?
- What is required (formally or informally) for newcomers in order to become part of the Christian community in your congregation? (Do not confuse membership with becoming part of the community—they may or may not necessarily be connected.)
- How is the formation of Christian community reflected in your congregation's purpose? Where do you see or not see a connection?



If love is the purpose (the clarity of identity) for the believer, then how would you state your personal purpose today? How would you state that for your congregation? Write your personal purpose statement using a dozen words or less. Do that for your congregation too. Compare notes in your group and see what might emerge from that discussion.

** Farwell Discourse – in the Gospel of John this material includes the Hight Priestly Prayer and comprises what would be understood as the Upper Room of Matthew, Mark, and Luke. Chapter 13 functions in John as preparation for the farewell discourse that is the entirety of Chapters 14-17. Farewell Discourses were a literary genre in ancient writing and were composed by those going on a journey, leaving a community, or facing death. There are four distinct components to the discourse in John: the Comforter (ch. 14), the Vine (ch. 15), the contrast of Jesus' love with the world's hatred (ch. 16) and the farewell "high priestly" prayer (ch. 17).*

