

John 13: 31-35

SERVING ON THE BROOKINGS SCHOOL BOARD THE PAST THREE YEARS HAS BEEN A HUGE LEARNING EXPERIENCE TO SAY THE LEAST. AS A BOARD WE HAVE HAD TO DISCUSS SCHOOL SAFETY IN THE EVENT OF A SCHOOL SHOOTER, WHAT TO DO IF ICE AGENTS ENTER A SCHOOL, HOW TO KEEP ALL STUDENTS SAFE ON THE PLAYGROUND FROM BULLIES. THESE HARD CONVERSATIONS MADE THE POINT THAT FEAR CHANGES ALL OF US. FEAR CHANGES WHAT WE THINK ABOUT AND THE CONVERSATIONS WE HAVE, AND IT HAS THE POTENTIAL TO CHANGE THE ACTIONS WE TAKE. WHEN SOMETHING HAPPENS TO MAKE US AFRAID, WE ACT DIFFERENTLY THAN WE DO WHEN WE FEEL SAFE. FEAR CHANGES US IN SITUATIONS BOTH PUBLIC AND PERSONAL. A BOMB GOES OFF IN A PUBLIC PLACE; ALL PUBLIC PLACES THINK ABOUT SECURITY. NORTH KOREA THREATENS THE USE OF NUCLEAR WEAPONS; GOVERNMENTS RESPOND WITH HEIGHTENED MILITARY PREPARATION. YOU WALK DOWN A DARK STREET AND SOMEONE SEEMS TO BE FOLLOWING YOU; YOU'LL SPEED UP OR CROSS TO THE OTHER SIDE. IF YOU LOVE SOMEONE AND ARE TOO AFRAID THEY WON'T LOVE YOU BACK, YOU MIGHT WITHDRAW COMMUNICATION OR HIDE YOUR FAULTS AND MISTAKES. AT WORK, YOUR BOSS ASKS TO SEE YOU AND WON'T SAY WHAT IT'S ABOUT; YOU CREATE SCENARIOS IN YOUR HEAD AND PREPARE YOUR REBUTTAL. WHEN YOU FEAR A SPOUSE OR PARTNER OR FRIEND MAY LEAVE YOU, YOU MAKE FEWER COMMITMENTS TO THEM.

THAT LAST ONE—THE FEAR OF BEING LEFT BY A LOVED ONE—THAT'S PROBABLY THE CLOSEST TO WHAT IS HAPPENING AROUND THE TABLE WHEN JESUS SPEAKS TO HIS DISCIPLES IN OUR GOSPEL STORY FROM JOHN. IT'S A STORY ABOUT FEAR. AND JESUS SEES IT AS AN OPPORTUNITY TO TEACH US WHAT TO DO IN THE FACE OF FEAR.

THE DISCIPLES HAVE BEEN WITH JESUS FOR THREE YEARS. HE HAS TAUGHT THEM AND CHALLENGED THEM; HE HAS COME TO BE SOMEONE THEY KNOW THEY CAN TRUST. BUT BY THE TIME OF TODAY'S READING, FEAR WAS ALL AROUND THEM. THE RELIGIOUS AUTHORITIES AND THE ROMAN OCCUPIERS HAD BEGUN MAKING PLANS TO KILL JESUS. SO IN THOSE DAYS WHEN JESUS' MINISTRY LED THE DISCIPLES CLOSER TO JERUSALEM, CLOSER TO THOSE WHO THEY KNEW THREATENED THEIR LEADER, THE DISCIPLES BECAME AFRAID. AND THEN JESUS NAMED OUT LOUD WHAT THEY HAD ALL BEEN THINKING ABOUT. HE GATHERED THEM AT SUPPER. HE SAID ONE OF THEM WOULD BETRAY HIM. AND WHEN THAT ONE HAD LEFT THE ROOM, HE SAID TO THOSE WHO WERE LEFT, "WHERE I AM GOING, YOU CANNOT COME." I AM LEAVING SOON, HE SAID. THE DISCIPLES WERE AFRAID. THE ONE WHOM THEY HAD THOUGHT THEY COULD TRUST WAS LEAVING THEM. OF COURSE THEIR MOST LIKELY RESPONSE WOULD BE TO PROTECT THEMSELVES, TO GROW QUIET AND TURN INWARD, TO ACT THE WAY PEOPLE ACT WHEN THEY ARE AFRAID OR UNSURE OF THE FUTURE.

BECAUSE JESUS KNEW THEM SO WELL, BECAUSE JESUS KNOWS THE HUMAN CONDITION SO WELL, IT IS AT THIS VERY MOMENT THAT HE SHARES WITH THEM HIS MOST IMPORTANT TEACHING. HE TELLS THEM HOW HE WOULD HAVE THEM FACE THEIR FEAR. THEY ARE AFRAID BECAUSE HE HAS SAID, "WHERE I AM GOING, YOU CANNOT COME." AND SO HE SAYS TO THEM, "I GIVE YOU A NEW COMMANDMENT, THAT YOU LOVE ONE ANOTHER. JUST AS I HAVE LOVED YOU, YOU ALSO SHOULD LOVE ONE ANOTHER. BY THIS EVERYONE WILL KNOW THAT YOU ARE MY DISCIPLES, IF YOU HAVE LOVE FOR ONE ANOTHER."

THERE IS NOTHING MORE FUNDAMENTAL TO BEING A FOLLOWER OF JESUS THAN TO LOVE ONE ANOTHER. AND THERE IS NO BETTER RESPONSE TO FEAR THAN LOVE. "I AM GOING WHERE YOU CANNOT GO," JESUS SAYS, BUT DO NOT LET THIS NEWS CAUSE YOU TO BECOME PEOPLE OF FEAR, DO NOT WITHDRAW FROM ONE ANOTHER. LOVE ONE ANOTHER. MOST OF US ARE SO USED TO ACTING OUT OF FEAR THAT JESUS MAKES A POINT TO SAY, "THIS IS WHAT SETS MY PEOPLE APART. FEAR IS COMMON, YOU CAN FIND FEAR AMONG ANYONE, BUT THIS IS HOW EVERYONE WILL KNOW THAT YOU ARE MY DISCIPLES...IF YOU HAVE LOVE FOR ONE ANOTHER."

THIS NEW COMMAND IS SIMPLE ENOUGH FOR A TODDLER TO MEMORIZE AND APPRECIATE, AND IT IS PROFOUND ENOUGH THAT THE MOST MATURE BELIEVERS ARE REPEATEDLY EMBARRASSED AT HOW POORLY THEY COMPREHEND IT AND PUT IT INTO PRACTICE.

WHAT JESUS WANTED US TO KNOW, APPARENTLY, WAS THAT ALTHOUGH PEOPLE WOULD FIGHT WARS OVER WHO HELD CORRECT BELIEFS, THIS WAS NOT JESUS' PRIMARY CONCERN.

"LITTLE CHILDREN," HE SAID, "I GIVE YOU A NEW COMMANDMENT, THAT YOU LOVE ONE ANOTHER." THE COMMANDMENT IS NOT ABOUT WHAT YOU BELIEVE, IT IS ABOUT HOW YOU LIVE.

KAREN BLIXEN WROTE THE NOVEL *OUT OF AFRICA* ABOUT HER MIDLIFE MOVE TO KENYA. IN KENYA SHE MARRIED, BOUGHT A COFFEE PLANTATION, AND STRUCK OUT ON HER OWN OUT IN THE BUSH, HIRING LOCAL TRIBESMEN AND WOMEN TO WORK THE PLANTATION. ONE MORNING A YOUNG MAN NAMED KITAU CAME TO THE DOOR AND ASKED IF HE MIGHT BE GIVEN A JOB WORKING THE HOUSE. KAREN SPOKE WITH HIM AND AGREED, AND HE BECAME THE BEST EMPLOYEE SHE COULD IMAGINE, A HARD WORKER, DILIGENT, HONEST, DEPENDABLE. AT THE END OF THREE MONTHS, KITAU CAME TO KAREN AND ASKED IF HE COULD BE RELEASED FROM HIS JOB. HE ASKED FOR A LETTER OF RECOMMENDATION TO SHEIK SALIM, A MUSLIM WHO LIVED IN A NEARBY TOWN. KAREN, DEEPLY DISAPPOINTED TO LOSE HIM, ASKED, "IS THERE SOME KIND OF PROBLEM? HOW CAN I KEEP YOU FROM GOING? CAN I OFFER YOU A RAISE?" KITAU REPLIED THAT HE WAS NOT INTERESTED IN MONEY. HE HAD BEEN TRYING TO DECIDE WHETHER TO BECOME A CHRISTIAN OR A MUSLIM, SO HE HAD COME TO WORK FOR KAREN, A CHRISTIAN, AND NOW HE WOULD GO WORK FOR THE SHEIK,

A MUSLIM, AND THEN HE WOULD MAKE HIS CHOICE. AND KAREN WAS IN DISBELIEF, FOR SHE KNEW HOW DIFFERENTLY SHE MIGHT HAVE ACTED HAD SHE KNOWN THAT KITAU WAS WATCHING HER TO SEE WHAT CHRISTIANS DO.

IF LOVE IS HOW PEOPLE WILL KNOW THAT WE ARE CHRISTIANS, HOW ARE WE DOING?

A PASTOR ONCE SAID, “PREACHERS ARE LIKE TRAIN CONDUCTORS. A PREACHER STANDS IN THE PULPIT LIKE A TRAIN CONDUCTOR ANNOUNCING THE STOPS. MEMPHIS! MEMPHIS IS THE NEXT STOP!” ON THE TRAIN PEOPLE THINK TO THEMSELVES, “MEMPHIS, HUH? I BET THE CONDUCTOR KNOWS ALL ABOUT IT. HE PROBABLY KNOWS THE GOOD PLACES TO EAT, DIRECTIONS AROUND TOWN. I BET THAT CONDUCTOR KNOWS ALL ABOUT MEMPHIS.” THEY THINK THAT BECAUSE HE’S ANNOUNCING THE STOPS. BUT IT’S NOT TRUE. IT’S NOT TRUE BECAUSE EVERY SINGLE TIME THE TRAIN GOES BY MEMPHIS, THE CONDUCTOR STAYS ON BOARD. HE NEVER GOES INTO THE CITY, SO HE DOESN’T KNOW WHERE TO GET A GOOD RACK OF RIBS OR A CLEAN HOTEL ROOM AT A GOOD PRICE. MUCH LESS DOES HE KNOW THE STORY OF WHY THE MAN ON THE STREET CORNER HASN’T HAD A BATH AND IS ASKING FOR MONEY. HE DOESN’T KNOW THE HURT OF THE MAN WHO IS ANXIOUS BECAUSE HIS MARRIAGE IS FAILING. HE DOESN’T KNOW THE ANXIETY OF THE WOMAN WHO IS AFRAID SHE IS GOING TO GET FIRED. HE DOESN’T KNOW THE FEAR OF THE MIDDLE SCHOOLER ON MONDAY MORNING AS HE FACES HIS BULLIES IN THE SCHOOL HALLWAY. THE ONLY PEOPLE WHO KNOW MEMPHIS THAT WAY...OR ST. LOUIS, OR CHICAGO, OR ANYPLACE YOU MAY BE—ARE THE PASSENGERS, BECAUSE WHEN THE STOP COMES, THEY GET OFF THE TRAIN. IT MAKES PRECIOUS LITTLE DIFFERENCE WHAT THE PREACHER SAYS IN CHURCH UNLESS THE PEOPLE GO OUT AND LOVE ONE ANOTHER.

WHAT YOU BELIEVE IS CRUCIAL, AND COMING TO CHURCH IS EXTREMELY BENEFICIAL. BUT WHEN JESUS FOUND HIS DISCIPLES IN THE MOST COMMON OF HUMAN SITUATIONS, IN A PLACE OF FEAR AND UNCERTAINTY, HE SAID TO THEM, “I GIVE YOU A NEW COMMANDMENT, THAT YOU LOVE ONE ANOTHER. JUST AS I HAVE LOVED YOU, YOU ALSO SHOULD LOVE ONE ANOTHER. BY THIS EVERYONE WILL KNOW THAT YOU ARE MY DISCIPLES, IF YOU HAVE LOVE FOR ONE ANOTHER.”

I SAY TO YOU TODAY, FOLLOWERS OF JESUS CHRIST: GET OFF THE TRAIN! ARISE AND GO OUT INTO THE WORLD AND LOVE ONE ANOTHER. ASK YOURSELF WHAT IT MEANS FOR US TO LOVE ONE ANOTHER, IN OUR HOMES AND IN OUR JOBS, AT OUR SCHOOLS, WITH STRANGERS, FAMILY AND FRIENDS. ASK YOURSELF WHAT IT MEANS TO LOVE ONE ANOTHER. ARISE! GET OFF THE TRAIN! FOR JESUS SAID, “BY THIS EVERYONE WILL KNOW YOU ARE MY DISCIPLES, IF YOU HAVE LOVE FOR ONE ANOTHER.”