

Sermon preached by the Rt. Rev. David Colin Jones, Suffragan Bishop of Virginia
At St. Stephen's Episcopal Church, Richmond—May 6, 2007

Jesus had washed his disciples' feet.

He had said "*Very truly, I tell you, one of you will betray me.*"¹

Jesus had said to Judas "*Do quickly what you are going to do.*"²

Jesus departed and then Jesus said, "*Little children, I am with you only a little longer ... I give you a new commandment that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another.*"³

Those words of Jesus were remembered and shared again and again. When the disciples gathered for teaching and fellowship, the breaking of the bread and prayer, they would have surely remembered the command to love.

The command to love is at the heart of our Easter faith. The disciples, commissioned as apostles, took on the task of spreading the Gospel of Love to the ends of the earth.

The apostles encountered jealousy, blasphemy, and inciting to riot. Some were jailed and beaten. But opposition and harsh treatment did not quench their missionary zeal.

That love led some of the apostles to face persecution and others to face untimely death and martyrdom. Their love was a stubborn love that would not submit to fear. It was an uncompromising love that would not give in to persecution or violent opposition. It was a valiant love that knew no bounds. It was a generous love that sought reconciliation and forgiveness.

¹ John 13:21

² John 13:27

³ John 13:34

Jesus said “*Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another.*” That mission has now been entrusted to us. In baptism, we are bound to seek and serve Christ, loving our neighbors as ourselves.

Today, a question for all of us to consider is this: “How we can love each other and our neighbor in a way that is consistent with Jesus’ love?”

First, we can express the love of Jesus in service.

Jesus had taught his disciples that “*the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve.*”⁴ As they gathered for fellowship and teaching, they would have remembered his kneeling before them and washing their feet as a servant.⁵

The image of foot washing reminds me that Jesus’ love is offered freely. It is a self-giving love, offered in innocence with no expectation of the other. It knew no bounds. It was love freely given.

The one called Master humbled himself in service to his disciples. And in serving them, he affirmed their dignity.

Jesus held up a model of service—of giving with no expectation of reciprocation. It is the basis of the church’s mission—the life-giving ministry of salvation.

It is heartwarming for me to hear of the emphasis on mission of this congregation.

Several years ago, my wife was in the Dominican Republic with the spouses of bishops. One Sunday, she was pleased and surprised to see members of St. Stephen’s in church and your

⁴ Mark 10:45 (NIV)

⁵ John 13:5

former rector in the procession. A St. Stephen's mission team was there on a mission trip, building a retirement home for the elderly who might otherwise have had no place to live.

This parish has been generous in helping establish two new congregations in this area, St. Clare's and St. Francis. I have had the pleasure of seeing the fruit of your generosity, especially as these congregations have also engaged in mission.

Today, I have heard of your upcoming mission trip to South Africa. I am confident that many will be blessed by this endeavor. In many significant ways, this congregation is expressing the love of Jesus through service.

2. Second, if we are to love as Jesus loved, we need to forgive.

From the cross, Jesus said "*Father, forgive them for they know not what they do.*" On the evening of the Day of Resurrection, the Risen Lord commanded his disciples, "*Whose sins you forgive, they are forgiven.*" The constant practice of forgiveness is at the heart of living the Christian life.

A Christian cannot afford to bear a grudge – it pollutes his or her spirit. Forgiveness is not an option for a Christian. Holding on to animosities is wrong for a follower of Jesus. It gets in the way of God's love, joy and peace. The peace of which Jesus spoke is the fruit of reconciliation and forgiveness.

If we are to love as Jesus loved, we cannot carry with us the hurts of the past. We must leave our anger at the Cross and seek a spirit of forgiveness.

For the Christian, a response to hurtful behavior is not 'an eye for an eye,' but rather forgiveness. We are to offer forgiveness and receive forgiveness.

A third expression of love is a passion for justice—a respect for the rights of others based on a love of Jesus.

The apostles ministered from a commandment to love. But they were not meek and mild in their loving. In fact, they were willing to offend for the sake of the gospel. When rejected, they shook the dust off their feet and went on.

Loving as Jesus loved has sometimes been reduced to being nice and considerate. But loving as Jesus loved may require more. It may mean action that would be unpopular – taking stands for justice and fairness that may be offensive to a close friend.

Loving as Jesus loved means being steadfast in the pursuit of justice and fairness. The cost of fidelity may be opposition and unpopularity. It is not new to the Christian life. We all can recount examples of individuals who have stood firm for justice and peace. We may recall times in our own lives when we have done so as well.

The image of Jesus turning over the tables of the moneychangers stands out as an example of our Lord's passion for what is right and just.

Can you imagine the emotion in his voice when he said, "*This is my father's house and you have made it a den of thieves.*" He overturned the tables and drove the moneychangers out of the temple.

A passion for what is right is a Christian virtue. It may not be popular. It may not be appreciated. But it is a powerful expression of love.

Jesus taught his disciples to love each other as he had loved them. We can follow that example through service and giving, through giving and receiving forgiveness and by seeing justice and what is right and fair in the eyes of God. May the Holy Spirit empower and inspire each of you as you show the love of Jesus to all of his people.

Amen.