



**Seattle First Baptist Church**  
Exploring what it means to follow the way of Jesus Christ

## ***LOVE AND BETRAYAL***

John 13.31-38

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## **SERMON**

I am so glad that Patrick and I have part of our “god-family” with us today – that is, our godchildren Virginia Grace and Jack and their mom and our dear friend, Robbin. They are part of an extensive set of relationships we call “family.”

And what my god-family has taught me is that love makes us draw the circle of our lives wide. However narrow our life plans may have been; no matter how unpredictable our connections may seem; no matter how many miles there are between us, our god-family stretches us because love makes us draw the circle of our lives wide.

And that’s important. That’s important because we live in a world that is increasingly trying to tell us that our interests should be narrowed; our connections should be limited; that our future depends on effectively dividing the world into spheres of power and purity.

And (a) that’s no longer possible, sustainable, or even realistic given the world in which we actually live and (b) love – if we care about such things – love, as my god-family keeps teaching me, makes us draw the circle of our lives wide.

The text for today is another one of those times in the gospel of John when Jesus is trying to get the disciples to think about what it means to love. Here is ...

### **John 13.31-38 (the *Inclusive Bible*)**

Once Judas left, Jesus said,

“Now is the Chosen One glorified and God is glorified as well. If God has been glorified, God will in turn glorify the Chosen One and will do so very soon. My little children, I won’t be with you much longer. You’ll look for me, but what I said to the Temple authorities, I say to you: where I am going you cannot come. I give you a new commandment: Love one another. And you’re to love one another the way I have loved you. This is how all will know that you’re my disciples: that you truly love one another.” Simon Peter said, “Rabbi, where are you going?” Jesus replied, “Where I am going you cannot follow now, though you’ll follow me later.” “Rabbi,” Peter said, “Why can’t I follow you now? I will lay down my life for you!” “Lay down your life for me?” exclaimed Jesus. “The truth of the matter is, before the cock crows, you’ll have disowned me three times!”

I’m wondering how many of you know the old camp song: “They’ll know we are Christians by our love.” Let’s try it ...

*We are one in the spirit; we are one in the Lord;*

*We are one in the spirit; we are one in the Lord;*

*And we pray that all unity will someday be restored;*

*And they’ll know we are Christians by our love; by our love;*

*Yes, they’ll know we are Christians by our love.*

So there you go. That’s from this passage in John 13 – John 13.35:

“They will know you are my disciples because you truly love one another.”

I probably don’t have to belabor the point, but you probably realize that people today don’t necessarily identify Christians with how loving they are. And part of the problem, I think, is that people see Christianity betraying Jesus’ message of love by continually narrowing its circles.

Speaking of betrayal, I'd like to point out that this lesson Jesus is teaching about love, begins with the Judas and ends with Peter being told that, his bravado notwithstanding, he too will betray Jesus by denying him three times before the night is over.

In between those two betrayals is this: "I give you a new commandment: Love one another the same way I have loved you because how you genuinely love one another is how folks will know that you are following me."

Let me interject that when Jesus says he is giving a "new commandment," it isn't exactly new. It's the same commandment all the way back in Leviticus 19 about loving your neighbor as yourself – a commandment that goes on to say, "You shall love the immigrant – the foreigner – as yourself."

And it appears that by the time of Jesus, there was consensus in the religious community that there were two great commandments – to love God with all your heart, mind, soul and strength and to love your neighbor as yourselves.

So what is so new about this commandment to love one another?

I'm wondering what Judas and Peter would have to say about loving one another like Jesus had love them. I wonder if they would say that loving one another like Jesus means drawing the circle wide enough to even include the betrayers.

And, in fact, I'm wondering if you can genuinely love someone without some experience of or some moment of or some risk of feeling betrayed.

One of the great things about having our goddaughter around is that she has a great voice. And sometimes she just breaks into song.

Apparently, she is into country music these days and, really, can there be any country music without love and betrayal?

The thing about love and betrayal is that it isn't always about someone else betraying us. Sometimes we are the ones doing the betraying – sometimes betraying the nature of love itself by narrowing our interests and closing our circles.

Perhaps Jesus is talking about a “new commandment” not because it is new, but because every time we are challenged to draw the circle wider we discover new ways of being true to love.

Every day I get to spend with my godchildren, I learn something more about love. Every time I am in that circle of my god-family I learn something more about love.

Today, our sisters and brothers at Japanese Baptist Church are beginning to celebrate their 120 years of life together. We might be tempted to pat ourselves on the back that just 30 years into our own life together we were helping them – Japanese immigrants - create a home for themselves here in Seattle.

But think about what Japanese Americans have to teach us about love and betrayal.

Imagine being told – and believing – that there was a new opportunity for life here in the Northwest only to arrive and be hated and feared and excluded. Imagine your children coming to believe that this was their country now only to be exiled in what both Presidents Roosevelt and Truman called “concentration camps.” Imagine finally returning to Seattle, only to discover that your land and your businesses and your homes had been confiscated by the government and sold off to other people.

Forget patting ourselves on the back! What do our Japanese American sisters and brothers have to teach us about love and betrayal?

The Rev. Dr. Paul Nagano was called to a “short-term” ministry as pastor of Japanese Baptist Church in 1971. He stayed for 16 years.

Having read his autobiography, I can assure you that Dr. Nagano has a lot to teach us about love and betrayal. When he died a couple weeks ago, I pulled out his book *Transformed by Love* and read again about how his faith evolved from an “absolute, exclusive and conservative [faith], focused on personal salvation,” to “a Christianity that is universal, ecumenical, and pluralistic.”

There were two things that accounted for that shift.

The first was the betrayal of the internment and all the deep questions of identity that experience stirred up for him. Who am I? Where did I belong? Is this the home I have been looking for?

In that experience of betrayal he also realized that the faith he had been taught was prone to draw the circle of God’s love too tightly – too narrow to include the wide movement of Love’s spirit. If the circle had been drawn to exclude him, how many others had been excluded? And how could that not be a betrayal of love itself?

The betrayal of prejudice and persecution led to a new experience and a wider understanding.

*Although I became a Christian through the “one way” dogmatic entrance, he says, I have become inclusive toward varieties of Christian theology and religions. My search for genuine identity in the pluralism of races has led me to acknowledge a pluralism of religions. Although I am a convinced Christian and focus on Jesus Christ, I see the incarnation of the spirit of God as inclusive love in the pluralistic world of religions.*

And so, he writes:

*We must all be embraced by agape love and put that love into practice for our present world. This is why we must reach out to other religions, other nations, other cultures, and other races in order to erase the boundaries of prejudice that we habitually create. The narrow truth claims of an exclusive Christianity shatters the harmony and community of nations, cultures, and religions. The harmony of our age depends upon the love of God being seen as inclusive and universal in pluralistic and multi-national society.*

These aren't the words of someone who has had an easy, privileged life and just wants people to get along. This isn't someone who is naïve about the realities of life or the politics of oppression.

This is someone who knows the experience of betrayal. This is someone who, by his own testimony, had drawn the circle of God's love narrowly and then came to see that as a betrayal of love itself.

This is someone who is listening for the harmony of a love that draws the circle wide.

And today, if you hear that voice, do not harden your hearts.

#### NOTES

Paul M. Nagano, *Transformed by Love* (Council for Pacific Asian Theology, 2009) see pages 119 & 123.