

There are sayings in these chapters in John that are almost like a heartbeat. These sayings are about love. Jesus says, “A new command I give you, that you love one another.” “Love one another like I have loved you, that is how people will know that you are my disciples.” “This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you.”

Jesus’s words were accompanied by actions in the immediate context. Having loved his own, he loved them to the end. He rose from supper, tied a towel around his waist, filled a bowl with water, and washed the disciples’ feet. This act of humility and service was too much for Peter. He declared, “You will never wash my feet.” Jesus told him, this is how it is going to be. And he told the disciples that he had given them an example. They should do just as he had done.

Jesus’s words would be accompanied with other great actions in the hours that followed our reading. Only hours later Jesus would be arrested, tried, convicted, and sentenced to death on the cross. Jesus said in our reading tonight, “Greater love has no one than this, than that someone lay down his life for his friends.” Jesus knew that his hour had come when he would be loving his friends by laying down his life.

Having considered Jesus’s actions, let’s return to those sayings—the heartbeat—of these chapters: “A new command I give you. Love one another. As I have loved you, love one another. That is how people will know that you are my disciples.” These words are not difficult to understand intellectually, but they are difficult to put into practice. His words seem impractical. How can I love my enemies, the ones who have deliberately hurt me? How can I do good to those who hate me? I shouldn’t have to live that way. I should be able to hate those who hate me and to get back at those who have hurt me.

Let’s be honest: It makes a lot more immediate sense to love your friends and hate your enemies. Loving your enemies sounds like a bad idea. It sounds like a surefire way to be humiliated and to suffer. If you love your enemies it will give them the impression that they have won. Everyone else will think you have lost. You will appear weak and as though you lack any self-respect. It would be like taking off your outer garment, wrapping a towel around your waist, filling a bowl with water, and washing the feet of someone who thinks that they are better than you. What good outcome could possibly come from that?

Realize that the same question could be asked of Jesus at the time of our reading. The disciples couldn’t understand why Jesus, whom they believed to be the Christ, the King, should allow himself to be arrested, tried, convicted, and crucified. To Jesus’s disciples it had to have appeared as though Jesus was throwing away all his popularity and power, and submitting himself to lying, cheating scoundrels. What good could possibly come from that? None that they could see.

But eventually they would begin to understand, and we can begin to understand. What Jesus accomplished was nothing less than the remaking of reality. Revelation chapter 21 talks about the new heavens and the new earth. It says that God will wipe away every tear. There will be no more crying, nor mourning, nor pain anymore because these former things have passed away. Jesus will be making all things new.

This gives us a new way to frame the issue. It is so common and so believable that loving our enemies is impossible, that we can't do good to those who hate us, therefore we have no other choice, but to act accordingly. However, this failure to believe is not just skepticism, it actually taking a side. If the new things Jesus works and Jesus commands are impossible, then you are necessarily taking the side of the old things. To reject the new things means that we are on the side of crying, mourning, and pain.

And, indeed, isn't this the very thing that results from us knocking out a tooth for a tooth and an eye for an eye? When we are trying to figure out ways that we can hurt someone, we are hoping that they will feel pain. That's the point. We want them to mourn. We want them to cry. And we need not feel any sympathy. We can look at them and say, "You deserved all of that and more."

The newness that Jesus works couldn't be more different. It is grace, mercy, and comfort. He, and he alone, can make the former things pass away and bring forth new things like **love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, gentleness, faithfulness, self-control**. The new things are so much better than the old things.

So whose side are you on? If you are on the side of the old things, then you really don't need to do anything. All you need to do is whatever comes naturally to you. If you feel anger, then be angry. If you feel hurt, then make somebody else feel hurt. This is walking in the works of the flesh which include self-indulgence, idolatry, strife, jealousy, rivalry, division, and so on. These things come so naturally to us that we often don't even know that we are doing them.

To be on the winning side, on the side where Jesus is making all things new, you have to do almost the opposite. As Jesus says, "**If you wish to be my disciple, you must deny yourself, take up your cross, and follow me.**" To deny yourself means that you don't do what comes naturally to you. To take up your cross is to accept the situation in life that God has put you in, even if it is difficult or painful. God will then work in you and through you to accomplish good. He will accomplish new things—fruit, you might say—by abiding in the vine as you endure the vinedresser's pruning.

Such is the picture language in our reading. Jesus is the vine. Jesus is the source of something new that produces wonderful fruit, spreading love, joy, and peace. Disciples are the branches that abide in the vine, getting their vitality from Jesus. The Father cuts off the branches that do not produce fruit and he prunes all the branches that do produce fruit so that they may produce more fruit. This pruning is akin to the cross. Pruning is painful. God removes that which is unproductive and that which hampers the production of fruit. The result is more fruit, more goodness, to the glory of God and for the good of this sad, oppressed world so stuck in the misery of the old things.

Jesus's new way is obviously better, and we have the opportunity to take part in it now. We don't have to wait until heaven. We have been appointed as branches in order to abide in the vine, to abide in Jesus's love, and that we should bear fruit. If we don't bear fruit, then we really don't belong with the vine. Jesus is bringing to nothing the old things and making all things new. The old things must go. The new must come.

Therefore, we should not quickly gloss over that heartbeat with which we began. It truly is the heartbeat of a new life. “A new command I give you, that you should love one another. As I have loved you, so also you must love one another.” This is God’s kingdom come. This is the new life of love.