

Easier Said Than Done©**John 13:31-35****April 24, 2016****Dr. Sharlyn DeHaven Gates****Fifth Sunday of Easter**

What a high bar Jesus set for his followers! He knows he is about to go through a painful, horrific time of torture and death, yet he becomes as a slave to his friends.

But Jesus also knows who he is – the Son of God – and while the pain and suffering will be incredibly difficult and, as a human, something he is dreading so much that he even asks that maybe God could take that event from him – make it not happen, if it could be God's will; but he knows that after he obediently goes through this painful death, he can trust that God will glorify him as the Son, as the risen Lord of Lords and King of Kings.

And that is incredible when you think of who he was – this Son of God – this Savior of the world – on his knees, washing dirty feet as a slave would do.

That image tells me that Jesus is modeling how each of us who follow him, who claim to be his disciples, who wish to model our lives after Jesus' example – that is the model for us, regardless of who we are, of what our social standing is in the community or the country or the world.

Regardless of who we are and where we are on the spectrum as Christians – whether we are liberals or conservatives or somewhere in the middle; whether we are a pastor, an elder, a deacon, a Stephens Minister or a worshipper who comes each Sunday, or comes once in a blue moon – we have a model to follow. And I think that how well we try to live that model says how we love.

First of all, it's about how we love Jesus, the one who loved us so much he was willing to become a servant – to obediently do what God sent him to do – to serve others with love and compassion; to give his all ... his energy, his teaching knowledge, his healing power, his life on a cruel cross.

When we come to really know him and to begin to grasp what Jesus accomplished for us in his life, we can't help but love him. Which is why, I think, being a Christian is more than just belonging to a church, or doing nice things, or having high morals. Being a Christian is more than just having knowledge about the Bible, or knowing doctrines or being able to say the Apostles' Creed without looking.

I think it is about knowing the Christ that the title Christian comes from. Studying him, learning what he taught, coming to know him as the one who has shown grace to us who are sinners. Actually coming to understand and know that we are sinners in need of grace. And that grace means we have been freely forgiven and that we belong to the family of God. It was grace given to us as a gift of love – not as something we earned, because we would never be able to work hard enough or be good enough.

Our relationship with God is because of Jesus. He has revealed God's love to us in all that he did. Until we come to grasp all of that, I think it is difficult to love Jesus in a deep and grateful

way. Some of us are further along than others, but we are all growing into that love more and more. But we are all on that path of knowing and loving Christ.

And it is to us, as well as those disciples so long ago, that Jesus says, 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.”

But, that’s easier said than done. At least it sure seems like it is to me. I used to be rather naïve about Christian love. I thought all Christians loved everybody – especially other Christians. That was before I went to seminary. That was before I started really paying attention to the news. That was before I was a pastor’s wife, or became a pastor, myself. And definitely before I started paying attention to politics.

I’ve found that sometimes the very people Jesus directed that commandment to have the hardest time following it. I had a church member say once about another church member that she hated that person. Can’t stand her. She didn’t really know her or know much about her.

Needless to say, the hated woman got the message and quit coming to church. Don’t be looking around trying to figure out who it was because it wasn’t in this church. But, the point is, we who are church members, who are members of the Christian (the Christ family) are called to be examples, to model what Jesus showed us about love.

Can you imagine Jesus saying that that he hated anyone? The closest he got to critical talk was to the Jewish temple leaders whom he called hypocrites. They knew the law so well, but they put keeping the law above showing mercy and love to those they were leading. Servant leaders they were not.

Have you noticed that this election year we have had several candidates running for president who are openly basing much of their rhetoric and policy on what they believe are Christian ethics – what they believe the Bible tells them. It seems like they are trying to outdo the other in who is the strongest Christian – quoting Scripture, waving a Bible around.

And yet, I’ve noticed that those who are the most vocal about being Christian are the most insulting, the most hateful about the other candidates, calling them hateful names, drumming up the worst they can find, whether it be unflattering pictures from something in the past. It is done with malice – at least it sounds like it to me.

Am I wrong to think that a person who is a Christian – a Christ follower – who wants to be a public servant – ought to take that servant part seriously? And wouldn’t they surely speak in love instead of hate about their opponents, sticking on policy differences?

But, Jesus wasn’t just saying to love other Christians. Remember how he said another time to love God first and to love your neighbor as yourself? And someone asked him “who is my neighbor?” and Jesus told the story of the Good Samaritan who helped a poor, beaten up Jewish man who was lying on the road to Jericho. No one else – no temple leaders who passed by, no godly people – no one would cross over and help him.

No one but the Samaritan who was from an ethnic group that everyone thought was no good. In fact, the Jewish people despised the Samaritans so much they would go the long way around Samaria just to avoid having to have any contact with them.

What *he* did – the Samaritan, (Jesus tell them), that's the kind of neighborly love I am telling you to show. And if Christians can't even love each other, they sure aren't going to be able to love someone who is of another faith. Or no faith at all.

I think that we have some contemporary models still in the world today. Like Pope Francis – who chose his name after someone he wanted to model his life after – St. Francis of Assisi who so loved Jesus that his life became one of poverty and living in peace with all creation.

Pope Francis – a Christian leader in the eyes of the world, whether you are Catholic or Protestant – was overcome with compassion for Muslim refugees who had traveled a long distance and were set to go right back to the violence they had fled.

He couldn't take them all, but with great compassion and love, he took in 12 families and sent them to Rome to be taken care of and helped to have a new life. It didn't matter that they were not Christians. It made no difference that they were Muslim – the same religious group our Christian politicians are warning us that we should be afraid of.

Fearing others and loving others don't go very well together. When we allow our fear to take over it is very difficult to truly love. I think that is what happened with the temple leaders and Jesus. I think they saw a power in Jesus that scared them. I think they were afraid, at least partly, because Jesus could do things that they couldn't do.

Jesus could heal; could cast out demons; could feed a multitude of people with a small amount of food. Jesus always outshined them when it came to mercy and love and compassion. I think they were afraid of how appealing that was to the people who were turning to Jesus and away from them and their authority. And so the more Jesus grew in his compassionate character, the more they grew in righteous indignation. The more their fear grew the more their hatred grew as well.

Loving others is easier said than done, right? It's easy to love those who are like-minded. Those we get along with good because they think like we do, they like the same things we do, their political ideals fit with ours. Their interpretation of the Scriptures goes along with where we are in our interpretation.

But it's not always easy to love those who disagree with us. Those who are opposite in so many ways in life are just plain hard to understand and difficult to talk to sometimes.

I never realized how heated people can become in wanting to be right and prove someone else to be wrong. As a person who has always been interested in sociology I admit I am both fascinated and appalled at the comments I see among people on Facebook. Many of those arguments are among people who don't even know each other but they call each other names and say very hateful things because of their differences in opinions.

Jesus, the servant-leader humbled himself by getting on his knees so he could do a slave's job. He washed the feet of those whom he loved. And that included Judas Iscariot, the one who would betray. The one Jesus knew would betray him, even as he tenderly and lovingly washed his betrayers feet.

Jesus, the Son of God, who saved us from ourselves - from our sinful ways that would lead to our destruction – did everything he could do out of love for you and me so that we might have this abundant life full of the many promises of God. Jesus obediently died for us so we might live.

To know him is to love him. And to love him is to do our best every day to obey his commandment – that is to love one another. Think about these things:

1. Have you come to know Jesus so well that you truly love him? If not, and you want to, I would be humbled to talk with you and pray with you and help you come to that place.
2. How are you doing with his commandment to love others? Is there someone you know – someone you think of immediately that is easier said than done to love?

If so, let's start there. Let's begin with asking God to soften our hearts and to fill them with the love of Christ. Let's ask God to help us live our lives in love as Jesus modeled for us. Let's outdo each other with little random acts of love.

I believe that if we become more and more conscious of doing it because we are disciples of the one we love, who loved us so very much, it will become easier to do. We know we love each other here.

Our challenge is to practice loving those whom we think is "easier said than done." Let's do it! With God's help, of course.

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