

What Jesus Gave
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Revelation 21:1-6

¹Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. ²And I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. ³And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, ‘See, the home of God is among mortals.

He will dwell with them;
they will be his peoples,
and God himself will be with them;
⁴ he will wipe every tear from their eyes.

Death will be no more;
mourning and crying and pain will be no more,
for the first things have passed away.’

⁵ And the one who was seated on the throne said, ‘See, I am making all things new.’ Also he said, ‘Write this, for these words are trustworthy and true.’ ⁶Then he said to me, ‘It is done! I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end. To the thirsty I will give water as a gift from the spring of the water of life.

John 13:31-35

31 When he had gone out, Jesus said, ‘Now the Son of Man has been glorified, and God has been glorified in him. ³²If God has been glorified in him, God will also glorify him in himself and will glorify him at once. ³³Little children, I am with you only a little longer. You will look for me; and as I said to the Jews so now I say to you, “Where I am going, you cannot come.” 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.’

What did Jesus give? Our reading in John tells us Jesus said: “I give you a new commandment, that you love one another.” While this reading isn’t one of the parables, especially noted by its straightforwardness, this same commandment can be found in the verses leading up to the parable of the Good Samaritan in the gospel of Luke, where Jesus asks the young lawyer to answer his own question of “what must I do to inherit eternal life?” Jesus prompts him by asking, “What is written in the law? What do you read there?” to which the young man replies, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself.”¹ “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might” is found in Deuteronomy 6. Love your neighbor as yourself? That’s straight out of Leviticus 19:18. The young lawyer knew his writings, and so would Jews raised in the faith like the listeners of John’s gospel. So what’s so new about this commandment: love one another?

¹ Luke 10:25-27

Professor Lewis R. Donelson suggests “The setting of this passage has long reminded readers of a covenant ceremony. It reads as if the announcement of Jesus’ departure, the giving of a new command, and the note that obedience to this command is the public mark of a new community, comprise John’s version of the new covenant that [Matthew, Mark, and Luke] place at the Lord’s Supper... This covenant context is probably why Jesus calls the commandment ‘new.’ It is obviously not new in the sense that a command to love has never been given before. Rather it is new in the sense that a new community emerges from its giving.”²

Professor Joseph A. Bessler describes the context in a slightly different way, writing, “Coming on the heels of the story of Jesus’ washing the disciples feet and of Judas’ betrayal, Jesus’ ‘command’ has the tone of an earnest plea – to care for one another, forgiving one another in the wake of Jesus’ death, even as he will forgive his tormentors from the cross... His new commandment is not so much a legal or military order as it is a profound plea and hope that the disciples will ‘abide’ in Jesus’ way of life and love.”³ There is truth in each of these interpretations, that this gathered group, these followers of Christ, were a new community unto themselves so the definition of “one another” was new because of the context.

However, we would be wise to not focus only on the first line of the command for Christ continues, expanding on the command, defining it and clarifying it, by adding: “Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another.” Early church father, Cyril of Alexandria, points out, “The law of Moses mandated the necessity of loving our brothers as ourselves, yet our Lord Jesus the Christ loved us far more than he loved himself. Otherwise, he would have never descended to our humiliation from his original exaltation in the form of God and on an equality with God the Father, nor would he have undergone for our sakes the exceptional bitterness of his death in the flesh, nor have submitted... to shame, to derision, and all his other sufferings too numerous to mention... It was indeed something new for love to go as far as that!”⁴ Wise words from the early centuries. Professor Donelson emphasizes Cyril’s point, writing, “Having Jesus as a model undoes all the limits. Whatever love might mean in a given moment, it asks for everything. Love does not calculate the costs.”⁵ What is new, then, about this commandment is “Just as I have loved you.” The context of Christ’s example is new.

Through that saving death Cyril wrote of, we look at the writings of another John in the book of Revelation. Because of that saving death, we read there will come a time when, “he will wipe every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more, for the first

² *Feasting on the Word: Year C, Volume 2*, p. 473.

³ *Feasting on the Word: Year C, Volume 2*, p. 470.

⁴ *Feasting on the Word: Year C, Volume 2*, pp. 470, 472.

⁵ *Feasting on the Word: Year C, Volume 2*, p.473.

things have passed away.” We tend to anticipate this in the future; after all Revelation is considered apocalyptic in style. However, the new heaven and new earth fall into an odd space of “already / not yet,” a space where signs of the newness can be found here and now, and yet we know that their full newness is not complete yet. We understand Jesus’ saving work in the same way – already begun but not yet complete until he comes again. Professor Erik M. Heen writes, “The atonement brought about through the death of Jesus – and the power for reconciliation that flows from it – is intended by God to extend through a restored humanity to all creation.”⁶ We know that humanity has not been fully restored and yet, when we follow Jesus’ new commandment, loving others as he loved us, then little by little, humanity is being restored, relationships are being mended, people are cared for who might otherwise be forgotten or ignored.

As much as we hope and wish for that time without any more mourning and crying and pain to come quickly, and how could we not in a broken world, we must not miss the glimmers and glimpses of relief in this world already. We have faith that our mourning can be lessened because we trust that Jesus has prepared a place for us all in the life to come. Jesus has said, “Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you.”⁷ That alone changes things; that alone is new for we now know a peace that we did not before, just as we now know a love that we did not before, that we could not know without Christ. Professor Michael Pasquarello III writes of the reading from Revelation, “The center of this story is Jesus Christ – his life, suffering, death and resurrection, and promised return in glory – the focal point on which the destiny of the universe turns. Apart from God’s gracious Word and gift of self-giving love through him, we could never know these things on our own, since our minds are so deeply colored by the world’s heart-breaking news.”⁸

What Jesus gave then, was not only his example of how we could, how we should, love one another, but also a hope in how the world might be changed by such a love. Sometimes it may feel like far more of a “not yet” world but there is always some “already” in it. Jesus has called us each to make more and more this “already” present – “By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.” Let us go, then, to make it clear that we are Christ’s disciples, to make it clear that there is reason to hope, that this new heaven and new earth are already begun.

Let us pray: Gracious God, we are your new community – fill us with the spirit of covenant relationship that we might look at one another as neighbors, that we might look at one another as Jesus did, we pray. Amen.

⁶ *Feasting on the Word: Year C, Volume 2*, p.464.

⁷ John 14:27.

⁸ *Feasting on the Word: Year C, Volume 2*, p.467.