

By This Will All People Know

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John 13:34-35

I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.

Galatians 6:10

So then, whenever we have an opportunity, let us work for the good of all, and especially for those of the family of faith.

Without meaning to sound blasphemous, I would have said, "Mission."

"By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you reach out to the world in mission, if you make uplifting the poor one of the highest priorities of your life and your church, people will know that you are my disciples. Because our mission & outreach confirm our message. If we say *"For God so loved the world,"* then we must demonstrate that love by feeding the poor, sheltering the homeless, comforting the lonely, lifting up the oppressed. And you know that these are not electives for Christians and churches. They are required courses for students of Christ. "What does the Lord require of you," said Micah, *"but to do justice, to love kindness and to walk humbly with your God."* (Micah 6:8)

Yet, that's not what he said, "By THIS everyone will know that you are my disciples." I would have said, "Mission." Other Christians throughout the years probably would have said, "Doctrine." "By this everyone will know that you are my disciples - - that you have clearly articulated doctrines, expressed historically by well-written creeds and catechisms. I actually like creeds & even a few catechisms, but that's not what Jesus said.

Others today might say, "Programming." "By this everyone will know that you are my disciples - - that you have programming that reflects your discipleship of Christ. - vibrant worship, vital small groups, support groups, ministry teams, outreach teams - you name it. Of course, the programs of any church should reflect its commitment to being Christ-followers together. But that's not what he said.

"By THIS everyone will know that you are my disciples - - that you have love for one another.

It's really quite striking if you think about it. As much as the Gospel IS about serving the world, Jesus says that people will really be able to recognize us as his followers if we truly love one another.

Think about it this way . . . Imagine yourself walking into a room filled with members of a club that you were thinking about joining, if they were fighting with each other, would that make you want to join? Only if you're a pathological fighter and they do exist by the way. In fact, do you know what happens when a pathological fighter finishes kindergarten? The answer: they get elected to the United States Congress.

But most people would not want to join that was fighting all the time. Our lives are complicated enough. We seek a church that will add to our sense of peace and well-being, not detract from it. How about this:

You walk into a room, let's say a large room, and the members of the club are standing around the edge of the room not talking with one another, would that make you want to join? Probably not. Folks thinking about joining any club or organization are looking for connectedness, for face-to-face relationships. Life is filled with pseudo-relationships, virtual relationships - and many of them are distant at best.

But if you walk into a place and there is warmth in that room, and joy in that room, and kindness in that room, and care in that room, wouldn't that make you want to be a part. "By THIS everyone will know that you are my disciples - - that you love one another.

Illustration. I have a dear friend who's been a second mother to me. She was & is the mother of my best friend growing up. (Mrs. Moore lives 350 miles from here) She's one of the most Christian people I've ever met. But she doesn't go to church. One day I finally got up the nerve to ask her why. And she told me this story. She was the secretary for her church for several years, and very involved. But a crisis happened in her family and she had to devote herself to caring for an elderly relative. And so she had to quit the position of church secretary. And for a month or two she had to go on Sunday mornings to care for this elderly relative, so she missed church. I wasn't sure where this was going, until she said, "Nobody called. Nobody from the church called to see if I was alright, to see why I quit. And so I assumed nobody cared."

"By THIS everyone will know that you are my disciples - - that you love one another.

So how are we doing?

The Apostle Paul was finishing his letter to the Galatians when he wrote this: *So then, whenever we have an opportunity, let us work for the good of all, and especially for those of the family of faith.* (Gal:6:10) Sometimes we're so busy saving the world that we forget to love the people right here.

Illustration. The Rabbi's Gift (adapted from The Different Drum Version by Dr. M. Scott Peck). The story concerns a monastery that had fallen upon hard times. Once a great order, it had become decimated to the extent that there were only five monks left in the decaying building: the abbot and four others, all up there in years. In the deep woods surrounding the monastery there was a little hut that a rabbi from a nearby town occasionally used for a hermitage. The monks always felt a strange comfort when they knew that the Rabbi was in his hut. "The Rabbi is in the woods, the Rabbi is in the woods again," they would say.

As he agonized over the approaching demise of his order, it occurred to the Abbot to visit the Rabbi and ask if he could offer any advice that might save the monastery. The Rabbi welcomed the Abbot to his hut. But when the abbot explained the purpose of his visit, the rabbi could only commiserate with him. "I know how it is," he exclaimed. "The spirit has gone out of the people. It is the same in my town. Almost no one comes to the synagogue anymore." So the old Abbot and the old Rabbi wept together. Then they read parts of the Torah and quietly spoke of deep things. The time came when the abbot had to leave. They embraced each other. "It has been a wonderful to be with you, the Abbot said, "but I have still failed in my purpose for coming here. Is there nothing you can tell me, no piece of advice you can give me that would help me save my dying order?" "No, I am sorry," the rabbi responded. "I have no advice to give. The only thing I can tell you is that the Messiah is one of you."

When the abbot returned to the monastery his fellow monks gathered around him to ask, "Well what did the rabbi say?" "He couldn't help," the abbot answered. "We just wept and read the Torah together. "The only thing he did say, just as I was leaving - it was something cryptic-- he said the Messiah is one of us. I don't know what he meant."

In the days and weeks and months that followed, the old monks pondered this and wondered whether there was any possible significance to the Rabbi's words. The Messiah is one of us? Could he possibly have meant one of us monks here at the monastery? If that's the case, which one?

Do you suppose he meant the Abbot? Yes, if he meant anyone, he probably meant Father Abbot. He has been our leader for more than a generation.

On the other hand, he might have meant Brother Thomas. Certainly Brother Thomas is a holy man. Everyone knows that Thomas is a man of light.

Certainly he could not have meant Brother Elred! Elred gets crotchety at times. But come to think of it, even though he is a thorn in people's sides, when you look back on it, Elred is virtually always right. Often very right. Maybe the Rabbi did mean Brother Elred.

But surely not Brother Philip. Philip is so passive, a real nobody. But then, almost mysteriously, he has a gift for somehow always being there when you need him. He just magically appears by your side. Maybe Philip is the Messiah.

Of course the rabbi didn't mean me. He couldn't possibly have meant me. I'm just an ordinary person. Yet supposing he did? Suppose I am the Messiah? O God, not me. I couldn't be that much for you, could I?

As they contemplated in this manner, the old monks began to treat each other with extraordinary respect on the off chance that one among them might be the Messiah. And on the off-off chance that each monk himself might be the Messiah, they began to treat themselves with extraordinary respect.

Because the forest in which the monastery was situated was beautiful, it so happened that people still occasionally came to visit - to picnic on its tiny lawn, to wander along some of its paths, even now and then to go into the dilapidated chapel to

meditate. As they did so, without even being conscious of it, they sensed the aura of extraordinary respect that now began to surround the five old monks and seemed to radiate out from them and permeate the atmosphere of the place. There was something strangely attractive, even compelling, about it. Hardly knowing why, they began to come back to the monastery more frequently to picnic, to play, to pray. They began to bring their friends to show them this special place. And their friends brought their friends. Then it happened that some of the younger men who came to visit the monastery started to talk more and more with the old monks. After a while one asked if he could join them. Then another. And another.

So within a few years the monastery had once again become a thriving order. And thanks to the Rabbi's gift, a vibrant center of light and spirituality.

"By THIS everyone will know that you are my disciples - - that you love one another.

Let us pray:

Lord Jesus, let your love so permeate our hearts and this place that people may know that we belong to you. Amen.