

What's Your Decision?

Acts 11:1-18 John 13:34-35

May 2, 2010 J. S. O'Neill

**Acts 11:1-18** Now the apostles and the believers who were in Judea heard that the Gentiles had also accepted the word of God. <sup>2</sup> So when Peter went up to Jerusalem, the circumcised believers criticized him, <sup>3</sup> saying, "Why did you go to uncircumcised men and eat with them?" <sup>4</sup> Then Peter began to explain it to them, step by step, saying, <sup>5</sup> "I was in the city of Joppa praying, and in a trance I saw a vision. There was something like a large sheet coming down from heaven, being lowered by its four corners; and it came close to me. <sup>6</sup> As I looked at it closely I saw four-footed animals, beasts of prey, reptiles, and birds of the air. <sup>7</sup> I also heard a voice saying to me, 'Get up, Peter; kill and eat.' <sup>8</sup> But I replied, 'By no means, Lord; for nothing profane or unclean has ever entered my mouth.' <sup>9</sup> But a second time the voice answered from heaven, 'What God has made clean, you must not call profane.' <sup>10</sup> This happened three times; then everything was pulled up again to heaven. <sup>11</sup> At that very moment three men, sent to me from Caesarea, arrived at the house where we were. <sup>12</sup> The Spirit told me to go with them and not to make a distinction between them and us. These six brothers also accompanied me, and we entered the man's house. <sup>13</sup> He told us how he had seen the angel standing in his house and saying, 'Send to Joppa and bring Simon, who is called Peter; <sup>14</sup> he will give you a message by which you and your entire household will be saved.' <sup>15</sup> And as I began to speak, the Holy Spirit fell upon them just as it had upon us at the beginning. <sup>16</sup> And I remembered the word of the Lord, how he had said, 'John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit.' <sup>17</sup> If then God gave them the same gift that he gave us when we believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I that I could hinder God?" <sup>18</sup> When they heard this, they were silenced. And they praised God, saying, "Then God has given even to the Gentiles the repentance that leads to life."

**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. <sup>35</sup> By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another."

"I give you a new commandment," Jesus said, "that you love one another." But the commandment he gives is not new in the sense that he just invented it. It's only new in the sense that hitherto no one had paid

much attention to it, so it probably *sounded* new. That command is as old as the hills – specifically that hill known as Mt. Sinai.

Do you remember the gospel story about the man who asks Jesus what he must do to inherit eternal life? Jesus answers the question with another question: "What is written in the Law?" The man says, "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." How did the man know the answer? Because he knew the scriptures. Deuteronomy and Leviticus, where those commandments come from, are attributed to Moses, the lawgiver, thirteen hundred years before Jesus.

Jesus is giving this "new" teaching at his last meeting with the disciples before his arrest, trial, and crucifixion. He has warned them about all this before, how his life will end upon the cross, and it has been hard news for them to bear. This was not according to their plans. They wanted a happy ending to the story. They wanted companionship with Jesus to go on and on. This cross business would ruin everything. There would be no more lessons learned from the master first-hand, no more intimate dinners, no more entertaining confrontations with the Pharisees where Jesus would come out on top. Now, there would only be the very serious and very risky business of living in faith.

Into this gloom Jesus inserts what he calls a "new commandment," but it was not new. It was as old as faith itself. The only thing new about it was the possibility that the disciples would finally get serious and try to live it. At first all the disciples will scatter in fear. Later they screw up their courage and start the church, but they are persecuted for it, and they learn day by day how very hard it is to maintain a loving regard toward one another, toward the world, toward the enemies that would destroy them. Jesus taught them to perceive a new world being born in their work, but there is a vast and treacherous territory lying between the desired future and the reality in which we live. These disciples would learn very tough lessons why Jesus called "loving one another as I have loved you" new. It was new because, being so hard to do, few had ever really been successful at it.

When things are pleasant and easy it's a simple thing to be kind and generous and magnanimous. When the times become threatening, when our preferred world no longer holds together, being loving is often the first thing discarded in our scrambling for cover. And, we are better at loving in some contexts and really poor at it in others. A mother loving her child is one thing, the affection between lovers something else, and friendship among comrades something else again.

But consider the commandment to love a neighbor, a stranger, a person of a different economic strata, a different level of education, a different color, a different cultural or ethnic identity, a person of different sexual orientation, or someone who is our enemy – these are the tests that prove the commandment. Jesus’ “new” commandment is hard, soul-stretching, and counter-intuitive. So, instead of loving, we remove ourselves, or become hostile or cold, we go away or we go to war. Instead of loving, we fear.

At the last, this love which Jesus commands is far from a pleasant feeling; it is a decision. It is not doing what comes naturally, it is a decision. It is not having your own dreams work out just the way you want them, it is a decision – to accept what is given to us in this life and live faithfully in it. Jesus, I suspect, chose his words very carefully: love is not a choice; it is a commandment. If you would love me, he said, you will love the other guy, too. You can’t have one without the other; you can’t have Jesus and not have your neighbor. Just as “loving one another” is not necessarily “liking each other,” “loving one another” isn’t just the absence of aggression toward one another, either. It is not “separate but equal.” It is not acting out our favorite bromides... like “why can’t we just get along,” or “if you can’t say anything nice, just don’t say anything at all.” This loving one another Jesus newly commands is seeking the good for one another, it is forgiving one another seventy-times-seven, it is going the extra mile, it is giving your coat and your cloak, it means inclusion and community and fellowship for the different and the strange, and it means sleeping with the enemy. It is turning as many cheeks as you have and turning them again and again. This “loving one another” is the very essence of grace, the core of compassion, and the *nth* degree of sacrifice. No wonder Jesus had to command it, and no wonder everyone, when they heard it, called it “new.” Loving is a decision, and it’s time to make one.

Once upon a time there were two brothers. The younger of the two seemed to lead a charmed life, and whatever he did brought favor and adulation. The elder brother could do nothing right, and even at his best he felt rejected. In a jealous rage, the elder killed the younger.

Once upon a time there were two other brothers – twins, actually. Born in the era where the eldest received the greater portion of an inheritance, the younger son conspired with his mother to cheat his brother out of his enfeebled father’s bequest.

Once upon a time there was a king who had grown irresponsible and moody. He faced rebellion in the ranks. A young, charismatic upstart was slowly but surely winning the hearts and minds of the citizens, including the

heart of the king's own son, who was the bold upstart's best friend. But, when it came down to a final battle, family loyalty prevailed and the king's son stood with him, and together they died at the hands of the son's best friend's army.

Much later, after the rebel leader had ruled as king for many years, he too faced civil war. And who was the leader of the opposition? This time it was his son.

All these, and many other stories, are straight out of scripture: Cain and Abel, Esau and Jacob, Saul and Jonathan and David, and David and Absalom. Scripture advances the story of salvation through the halting, often painful stories of parents and children, colleagues and friends who, struggling to inaugurate a new day, fracture the immediate future but unwittingly write the story of God.

The commandment Jesus gives is ever new. It will never become old. Friends, remain loyal and be patient with each other. Enemies, pray for one another. Parents, hold on to your sanity. Husbands and wives, be kind to each other. Children (and we are all somebody's child), love your parents. All of us, let us allow Jesus' commandment to be new in us, and let each new day begin as yet another step toward that reality where no tears flow, no fear thickens our hearts, and no loss ever obscures the deep and mysterious bounty of God's love for us.