

One Simple Command – John 13:31-35

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The news was dominated this week again by the accounts of death and destruction in Russia's war on Ukraine. It continues to be a tragic and troubling story. But, so are these two stories.

First, a basketball coach in Pleasantville, New Jersey, was banned from coaching, ordered to take sensitivity training, and directed to make a public apology some years ago after he had given one of his players what he called the "Crybaby Award" at the team's annual awards banquet. A trophy made up, showing an infant atop a pedestal with a plaque bearing the inscription of the player's name and the words "Crybaby Award," was presented to the young man in front of his teammates and parents. The coach was a special education teacher at the school.

And then there was this story. A Henderson, Texas, husband's intimate welcome home for his wife after her tough day at the office was in reality a coldly calculated plot to kill her, the woman claimed. Teresa Wolfe said her husband, William Joseph Wolfe, greeted her at the door of their home one day with a romantic card that read, "I just hope you know that each moment we spend together means so much to me ..." She says he then followed up the seemingly loving gesture by leading her into a prepared bubble bath complete with candles and romantic music.

As she relaxed in the bath, listening to soft music from a radio her husband apparently set up near the bath, she suddenly realized the radio, which was plugged into an electrical socket in her bedroom, was slipping into her bath.

"I caught and tossed it out real quick," Wolfe told ABCNEWS. "I sat there for a minute and it didn't seem right to me." Wolfe claims her husband began to act suspiciously after the incident and says she couldn't shake the feeling something wasn't right.

After doing some investigating on her own, Wolfe says she discovered he had taken out a quarter-million-dollar life insurance policy on her. She says she also found a receipt for a dozen roses she never received. Then, when she tried to trace his Internet use, she discovered he had visited Internet sites that offered information on the subject of electrocution. William Joseph Wolfe was later arrested for attempted murder.

Maybe it was stories like these that prompted Jesus to make his words in John 13 his final command to his disciples during their last supper together: Love one another. In the midst of Jesus preparing the disciples for his departure from them, in the midst of Jesus saying to them, “Where I am going, you cannot come,” he offers a parting shot. It’s almost as if he couldn’t leave them without them knowing how important this one last command was. “Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another.”

Throughout Jesus’ ministry, he offered many commands on love: love the Lord your God with all your heart, mind, soul and strength, love your enemies, love your neighbor as yourself. But, here, Jesus commands his disciples to love each other.

Love each other? How hard could that have been? The disciples knew each other intimately. They worked together, were close enough to be related to each other, enjoyed times of leisure together. And yet, he commands them to love each other?

Well, we all know how difficult it can be—strangely—to love somebody we are so close to—or at least to put into practice the love we feel for them. It’s so often difficult to practice loving people within our own communities, people we know so well: members of our biological families, our church families, our work families. People we think would be the easiest to love are often the most difficult.

And when that love is not present, we see arguments, conflicts, divorce, division—all those things that make for very trying times.

Jesus gave his disciples a new *command*, not a new *suggestion*. It was a command that required action. To love is to take action. It

requires a decision to be made. Often love is seen as being a warm fuzzy feeling, one that we have no control over. But, just as we have control over whether we hate somebody or disrespect somebody, we have control over whether we love somebody. It requires intentional action.

We are all made in the image of God. And because God is love, we then possess that same love for ourselves and each other. It is our first instinct. And yet, we must make the decision to express that love to those who are the closest to us.

To love means to practice loving.

C.S. Lewis said, "Do not waste your time bothering whether you love your neighbor; act as if you did. As soon as we do this, we find one of the great secrets. When you are behaving as if you loved someone, you will presently come to love him. If you injure someone you dislike, you will find yourself disliking him more. If you do him a good turn, you will find yourself disliking him less."

Love comes when we practice love. Because the disciples were around each other quite a bit, it would've been easy for them to get annoyed with each other. Like brothers or sisters often do, too much together time once in a while brings out behavior not worthy of admiration.

A Sunday school teacher was discussing the Ten Commandments with her 5- and 6-year-olds. After explaining the commandment to "honor" thy father and thy mother, she asked, "Is there a commandment that teaches us how to treat our brothers and sisters?"

Without missing a beat, one little boy (the oldest of a family) answered, "Thou shall not kill."

It takes work and practice to love somebody you're supposed to love.

Two brothers worked together on the family farm. One was married and had a large family. The other was single. At the day's end, the brothers shared everything equally, produce and profit.

Then one day the single brother said to himself, "It's not right

that we should share equally the produce and the profit. I'm alone, and my needs are simple." So each night he took a sack of grain from his bin and crept across the field between their houses, dumping it into his brother's bin.

Meanwhile, the married brother said to himself, "It's not right that we should share the produce and the profit equally. After all, I'm married, and I have my wife and children to look after me in years to come. My brother has no one, and no one to take care of his future." So each night he took a sack of grain and dumped it into his single brother's bin.

Both men were puzzled for years because their supply of grain never dwindled. Then one dark night the two brothers bumped into each other. Slowly it dawned on them what was happening. They dropped their sacks and embraced one another. -Jack Canfield, Mark Victor Hansen, *A 2nd Helping of Chicken Soup for the Soul* (Deerfield Beach, Calif.: Heath Communications, 1995), 37.

It's hard to love in this way, though. It seems like just a huge task. It's intimidating. So, the question is, "How do you start loving somebody you think is too hard to love?"

There is a story about a man who had a huge boulder in his front yard. He grew weary of this big, unattractive stone in the center of his lawn, so he decided to take advantage of it and turn it into an object of art. He went to work on it with hammer and chisel and chipped away at the huge boulder until it became a beautiful stone elephant. When he finished, it was gorgeous, breath-taking. A neighbor asked, "How did you ever carve such a marvelous likeness of an elephant?" The man answered, "I just chipped away everything that didn't look like an elephant!"

If you have anything in your life right now that doesn't look like love, with God's help, you can chip away at it. If there is deceit or hatred or resentment or jealousy toward somebody close to you, you can chip away at it so that you finally get to love and doing the things that love, our first instinct, entails.

“By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another,” said Jesus. How will everyone know you today? By your love?

Amen.