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John 13:1-17, 31b-35

One of my all-time, top five, favorite movies is 2003's "Love, Actually." It has a star-studded ensemble cast, including Emma Thompson, Hugh Grant, Liam Neeson, Colin Firth, Kiera Knightley, Alan Rickman. There are a whole bunch of story lines going on at the same time. And they all have to do with love. Viewers watch lots of different versions of love, between: parents and children, brothers and sisters, friends, coworkers, boyfriends and girlfriends, husbands and wives. You can imagine how this would be possible to do. Love is such a difficult concept to nail down. Our society – and each of us – has many visions of love.

The movie raises questions. What is love? Is love a feeling – like mutual affection? Is love sex? (Yes, the movie is rated "R"). The movie critiques both of these, in different ways. Is love commitment to a relationship? If it's commitment, what kind of relationship do we commit to? Or is love fundamentally action? If it's action, then what kind of action?

Beyond the theoretical, it's hard to know what love means or looks like at times. How does one love someone who is being self-destructive? How does one love someone who is actively opposed to the health of oneself or others? How do

we relate lovingly with someone who has conflicting hopes and visions for the future – which impact us?

Jesus knew how hard love is to understand, too – I think that’s why he teaches his disciples about it today. Jesus faced some of the same relationship difficulties that we face. Some scholars believe that Judas may have betrayed Jesus not out of hatred, but out of love. Judas may have thought that Jesus’ arrest would jump-start events that would lead to Jesus reigning as a political, earthly king. On this side of history, we all know that this was not true. The betrayal may have had loving intentions, but the immediate result involved arrest and suffering and death. As for many things in human life, God made something truly good and loving (for the world!) out of Judas’ confusion about love.

We hear Jesus give a “new” commandment to his disciples. “Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another.” (*Jn 13:34*) What’s so goofy is that the idea of loving one another isn’t new at all! That concept appears all over the Jewish scriptures. At the time, all Jews would have known that the heart of the Jewish faith is to love God, with all your heart, and soul, and might, which then flows over into loving our neighbor.

The “new” part of Jesus’ commandment is the first part, not the second. It’s the comparison: “Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another.” (*Jn 13:34*) It’s interesting that Jesus did not give this command while he was hanging on the cross. That would have been inconceivable for anyone else to do as he did! No, he told his disciples this when he was doing a very ordinary act of love.

The foot washing is one small example of the many ways that Jesus poured himself out for others. In love, he offered his days as a teacher and a healer, a forgiver of sins, an interpreter of scripture, a friend to the friendless, an advocate for those in need, a miracle worker. With each word of grace and each action of love, he poured himself out as a gift to the world. Though he was God, Jesus was a servant who lived God’s grace in the fullest possible way. That led to his execution – which then led to his glorious Easter resurrection.

Often this idea of Jesus giving himself to the world is tied to language of “sacrifice.” But most of the ways that Jesus gave himself to the world in his life did not involve him “sacrificing” himself. He gave himself – fully – by being most fully himself. Jesus Christ was God’s love for the world.

Jesus’ choice of foot washing reveals something important about what his commandment to love means. Jesus love is obviously not about sex, given the context of the story. It would be easy to think a feeling could connect – there must

have been some mutual affection between Jesus and his disciples, right? But then we remember that he washed everyone's feet. Including Peter, who Jesus knew would deny him. Including Judas, who Jesus knew would betray him. That cuts out Jesus' love being a relationship of trust and commitment, too. Peter and Judas both were leaving those ideals behind.

Jesus' love stretches beyond what many of us would prefer. According to our story, it does not seem to depend on the other person. It's not about their worthiness, or responsibility... it's unconditional.

In his conversation with the disciples, Jesus highlights that his love requires a mutual relationship. The disciples were his students and followers. Yet his relationship with them was not one directional – it wasn't them following or serving him in love. Jesus, the one with the authority and the power, was the one to stoop down and wash his students' dirty feet. When Simon Peter put up a good fight and said, "You will never wash my feet." (*Jn 13:8*)

Jesus made it clear that love involves a mutual relationship of serving in love. "Unless I wash you, you have no share with me." (*Jn 13:8*) This calls to mind how we are drawn into Christ in the waters of baptism – we are showered with the Spirit's grace. I think Jesus' statement also speaks to how we are knit together as the people of God. It is in acts of love – mutual service according to each one's gift – that we

are bonded together. We receive God's grace and love through the people around us. And we share God's grace and love by serving the people around us. We can't be Christians with only half.

Martin Luther taught that every scripture passage has both law and gospel. In passages like tonight, the law is the command from Jesus that's paired with a promise. The commandment is clearly "I have loved you, love one another." But the promise doesn't appear until two chapters later in the gospel of John. When disciples keep Jesus' commandments, there is a big gift: "If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commandments and abide in his love." (*Jn 15:10*)

When we love like Jesus Christ, God dwells with us and in us. When we serve our neighbors with our gifts, it's not just acting in loving ways. Our actions of serving love are an invitation for God to keep Christ's promise, that God would be present with us.

God's active, sometimes-perceivable presence in our lives is the blessing for those who give themselves away to the world. Giving ourselves is not about dying for the world's sins, as Jesus did. It's about offering our gifts in loving service to others. We're commanded to live in God's love as Jesus did, too – through servant

actions that bear God's presence to others – and through receiving the gifts of others. With lives like these, all of us and our neighbors are drawn into deeper communion with one another and with God, the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.