

# By this will they know

A sermon on *John 13: 31-35* & *Acts 11:1-18* by Nathan Nettleton, 19 May 2019

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## Message

Outrageous love is the most obvious characteristic of Jesus, and therefore it is the one thing that will make us recognisable as his followers.

## Sermon

If you ask the average Aussie about how they would identify a Christian, the chances are that they will list one thing that they do, and probably several things that they don't do. The one identifying thing that they do will be "they go to church." If the person has recently been targeted by one of those pushy street evangelist types who try to force themselves on you if you are walking or sitting alone in public and won't let you go until they have got through their rehearsed spiel on "the gospel", then they might add that, with obvious contempt in their voice, but mostly it will probably just be "they go to church."

The list of don'ts will vary a bit, depending on who they've bumped into recently. Perhaps "they don't drink", or "they don't swear", or "they don't have sex until they get married" might feature, but increasingly the strident right-wing Christian political agenda has narrowed the list down to "they don't tolerate homosexuals" and "they don't allow abortion".

Jesus must be heartbroken over this. Being against things is a million miles away from what he wanted his followers to be known for. As we heard in the gospel reading tonight, Jesus told his followers, "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."

Presumably then, the answer that Jesus would wish his followers to be inspiring from the average Aussie Joe in the street is "They bloody well love everybody, those Christians. They've got no idea! They treat scum like royalty. They want to open the doors and welcome in everyone. They want a second chance for every lowlife loser. They don't seem to know when to stop. I mean, I'm all for love your neighbour and love your family and all that, but charity is supposed to start at home, and these Jesus followers, they are just fanatical about it. They don't seem to know when to stop."

Tragically, I don't think I've ever heard that answer given. It did seem to be the answer given about Jesus himself, though, and I guess that's the point. The first horizon of Jesus's words were the period immediately after his departure. That's clear, even from the context, because these words about the new commandment follow immediately on from him saying "I am only going to be with you for a little while longer."

They are part of his conversation with the disciples at the last supper, and are kind of his parting words, his last will and testament if you like. So in the short term he is thinking about a situation in which people will remember what *he* was like when he was walking the streets, and so the point is that people will recognise his followers by their similarity to him. They will say, "These people treat everyone the way that Jesus bloke treated everyone. They must be followers of his, because nobody else in their right minds would behave like that."

For that to be the case – for people to automatically make that connection – there has to be this over-the-top, above-and-beyond aspect to the love that is shown.

It is quite common for the average Aussie to say, “Yeah, I reckon I’m a Christian; I follow the golden rule, love your neighbour, and all that.” But Jesus is clearly suggesting that what people will notice is something that is clearly abnormal, shockingly above and beyond the norm. In another context, that was the point of Jesus offering the parable of the good Samaritan in answer to the question, “who is my neighbour?”

Loving your neighbour is not the least bit radical, so long as you can give your own safe definition of who your neighbour is. As Jesus said in the sermon on the mount, “why should you expect any special reward for loving those who love you? Even the gangland killers and people smugglers do that.” And so when the person to whom he says “love your neighbour” asks “who is my neighbour?”, he tells the parable of the good ISIS supporter and says “there’s your neighbour.” No wonder they called him a fanatic and took offence.

Right the way through the gospel accounts, the things that are constantly getting Jesus into trouble with the religious leaders, and sometimes with the general public as happened in his home town, are things where his words and actions prioritise loving someone over obeying rules, observing social niceties, and maintaining the conventional boundaries of who is my neighbour and who is not.

“This bloke needs healing and I could do it, but it’s the Sabbath and I’m not supposed to do that sort of thing on the Sabbath. Stuff it. I love him. Why make him wait any longer? I’ll do it now.” TROUBLE!

“This woman has been caught committing adultery, and the crowd have gathered to execute her by stoning as the law requires. Do I endorse the law and let them do it? No! Love does not stand by and let this woman die. I’ll stick my neck out and point out that she’s no worse than anyone else here and challenge them to claim otherwise. That should save her.” Big Trouble!

“These people are sitting here in the synagogue applauding me for saying that God has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, but they are so blind to their own racism. They hate the Sidonians and the Syrians. I’ll tell them that God loves the Sidonians and the Syrians just as much as them and that God wants them to do likewise.” Big big trouble. This guy is going to get himself thrown off a cliff.

Actually this last example is the same issue we see played out in the reading we heard tonight from the Acts of the Apostles. And it goes to show that the first generation of Jesus’s followers were still struggling with the implications of this boundary breaking love after his resurrection and ascension. They were still caught up in an assumption that to be a follower of Jesus meant assimilation to the Jewish lifestyle, but God had sent Peter to speak to the household of Cornelius who was not only a gentile, but an officer in the hated Roman occupation forces.

And when God obviously pours out the Holy Spirit on Cornelius and his family, Peter and the church leaders have to decide what to make of this outrageous disregard of the boundaries. Are they supposed to love these people? Accept them? Sit and eat at the same table with them? Baptise them? Unthinkable! It goes against everything they’ve been brought up to believe! But they rightly conclude that if the Lord himself is breaking the boundaries and

pouring out his love on these people, then they either have to follow suit or get themselves out of step with what God is doing, so they had better love as Jesus loves, no matter what trouble it might cause.

Perhaps then, instead of just saying, “If you love like me then everyone will know that you are my followers,” Jesus could have said, “If you love so generously and extravagantly and outrageously that you stir up scandal and controversy and get denounced as fanatics and lunatics and sympathisers and bleeding hearts, *then* everyone will know that you must be one of my lot.”

There is no shortage of challenges facing today’s followers of Jesus in looking at how we love those who are often hated in our society. There are still far too many of us ready to support more militant border control on the grounds of protecting Australia’s interests, when such nationalistic motives are clearly exactly what God was overthrowing in the house of Cornelius and in Jesus’s sermon at Nazareth.

There are still far too many of us who support hate speech against the LGBT community and exclusion from our churches. Even if you think that the Bible outlaws gay sex, Jesus asks you to be known for your love, not your moral scruples, and provoking hatred of anyone is clearly an indefensible violation of the call to love all people.

There are still far too many of us who promote suspicion and fear of Muslim people, and advocate legal suppression of their religious freedom. Jesus said that genuine love casts out fear, so anytime we find ourselves responding out of fear or even more, promoting fear, we are surely on the opposite side of that equation to Jesus. Provoking fear and suspicion of any community is clearly an indefensible violation of the call to love all people as neighbours.

Jesus’s call to love as he loved affects pretty much every question and issue we face in life, both as a congregation and as individuals in the other circles we move in. It goes to the core of our discipleship, not just because Jesus issued it with the force of a commandment, but because it was the most distinctive feature of his own life and ministry, of his own way of being.

When we gather around this table to offer ourselves to Jesus and to his people, love is what that is all about. Loving God; loving one another; loving others. And every time we gather here, we are challenged again to come to terms with just how radically and extravagantly and dangerously Jesus loves us, and with that challenge comes the call to offer ourselves to him, to be remade in his image, as people who love with a seemingly ridiculous and outrageous abandon, for his glory and for the liberation of the world.