

The Litmus Test

John 13:31-35

Lethbridge Mennonite Church

By: Ryan Dueck

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In the fourteenth century, scientists discovered that a mixture of colored organic compounds obtained from lichen called “litmus” would turn red in acid solutions and blue in alkaline solutions and could thus be used as an acid-base indicator.

Thus, was born the idea of a “litmus test.” Something that provided irrefutable evidence about the acidity of a given solution.

Over time, this term came to be used more figuratively, and was extended beyond the realm of physical science.

It was and is used as to describe a criterion for telling if something is one thing and not another.

The litmus test for being a true Calgary Flames fan would be whether or not you are prepared to endure long years of failure and ridicule (not that I’m still bitter about this year’s Stanley Cup playoffs!).

The litmus test for being a real Mennonite is whether or not Kevin can plot your ancestry in his genealogy program.

So, what is the litmus test to determine an authentic follower of Jesus?

We have our ways of measuring, don’t we?

Some look to the world of activism for the litmus test. Those who are involved in enough of the right progressive causes in the service of social justice and peace work are real Christians.

Or what about moralism? Surely those who do enough right things and avoid enough wrong things and generally impress God with their purity are the real deal!

Maybe we should look to intellectualism. Those who have enough right answers about God, those

who know enough church history or doctrine, those who have their theological i's dotted and t's crossed and who seem to have no doubts—surely *these* are the real Christians.

In our passage today, Jesus offers his own litmus test.

The scene is the Last Supper, the night Jesus shares a last meal with his disciples and in John's gospel speaks the Farewell Discourse, his last words before dying on the night before his crucifixion.

He says: A new commandment I give you, that you love one another as I have loved you. **By this everyone will you are my disciples**, if you have love for one another.

Love is the litmus test for discovering who a real disciple of Jesus is.

But I suspect this says both too much and too little. Anyone who has spent any time at all in a church know very well that Jesus preached love. This is not really a surprise.

“Love” is one of those words that can easily be reduced to vague platitudes or fleeting emotions or non-threatening ideas that Christians should generally be kind, decent people.

Now, I do happen to think that Christians should be kind, decent people. But this is not the litmus test that Jesus has in mind.

There are plenty of kind, decent people out there, after all. They're not very difficult to find, and many of them profess no interest in the way of Jesus.

The key phrase in this short passage is found in verse 34: “Just as I have loved you.”

This is the “new” part of the new commandment.

Jesus has told his disciples before that love is the heart of the law. *Love the Lord with all your heart, soul, mind and strength, and your neighbour as yourself.* We know these words well.

But here, Jesus adds a twist.

Not, “love as you would love yourself” but “love, as *I* have loved you.” Not love as an expression of a healthy self-understanding and concern, but love in imitation of Jesus.

And so, the logical next question would be, “And how has Jesus loved us?”

Well, in the verses that immediately precede our text this morning, Jesus has shown or pointed toward what this love looks like in two ways.

First, he has washed his disciples' feet. Against their protests.

The disciples knew that the Messiah did not and should not stoop to do such things. This was undignified work. It would usually be a task assigned to the slave of the household, not the host of the meal, and certainly not Israel's anointed one.

Yet Jesus insists on washing their feet and instructs them to follow his example in doing the same for each other.

The second thing he does is talk about his death. He talks about the one who will betray him. He is described as loving his disciples "to the end" and knowing that "his time was coming," that he would not be with them much longer.

He says to Judas, "Do quickly what you must do," knowing full well that this would accelerate his coming death. He says, "Now has the Son of Man been glorified, a phrase he has earlier used to speak of his death and resurrection (John 12:23).

Jesus knew that he would die. He knew that this was what the love of God required, how it would finally be expressed.

Jesus was no unwitting victim. He very clearly understood his death as part of his vocation.

So, in sum, loving like Jesus looks like:

1. Lowering oneself to serve our brothers and sisters, refusing the categories and hierarchies that human beings so naturally gravitate toward
2. Sacrificing ourselves, even to the point of death, for the sake of love.

This is how Jesus loved his disciples. This is how Jesus loves us. And this is how we are to love one another.

This is the litmus test. This is the kind of love that will let those around us know that we really *are* disciples of the Crucified One.

How are we doing with the litmus test that Jesus has left us?

Are we loving as Jesus loved? Are we stooping to wash feet, caring nothing for status and propriety? Are we sacrificing our desires, our preferences, our agendas for love's sake?

Are we prepared for something in us to die so that something in another might live?

Do people look at the church and see a group of people who love one another the way that Jesus loved us?

I suppose that, as always, it depends where you look. Quiet acts of sacrificial servant love rarely make headlines or demand to be noticed.

But I think that when many people look at the church, they see mostly the categories I mentioned above.

They see activists who bludgeon one another with their causes, condemning (subtly, or not) those who aren't as fired up about this or that issue as "real Christians" ought to be.

They see moralists who seek to police the behaviour of others and who constantly judge those who don't measure up.

They see intellectualists who treat the life of faith as one big theology test to see who gets enough of the facts about Jesus right enough, and who are constantly tabulating scores.

This isn't just what the watching world sees; it's what we see, when we look honestly.

Earlier this week, our church hosted the Mennonite Church Alberta Faith Studies conference. Ken Quiring was our guest speaker and during one session he referred to the grim irony of the existence of over thirty-nine thousand Christian denominations in the world.

We sometimes chuckle over this because, well, what else can we do? We're one of them, after all!

But it struck me on Monday how utterly sad this is. Thirty-nine thousand plus?! Seriously?! We Christians have divided over everything under the sun and have at times treated one another with an astonishing lack of grace.

Liberal Christians ridicule conservative Christians and vice versa. High church Christians look down on simpler expressions of faith and vice versa.

Even at the local church level, we often struggle to love our fellow Christians who annoy us, frustrate us, who don't measure up to our expectations.

Again, it depends on where and how you look. But it seems beyond question that two thousand years or so after that supper in the upper room where Jesus spoke his last words before dying, we are not doing as well as we might with the one thing that Jesus said would show the world that we are his disciples.

A few years ago, I read an interview with J.I. Packer, the prominent evangelical theologian and the

esteemed author of *Knowing God*.

Packer is now in his tenth decade on the planet, so he's seen a lot of things come and go in the church.

Here's what Packer said in response to the question of what he thought about the state of the church at this advanced stage of his life and career:

When I go around to churches, I get the strong feeling that we aren't taking love as our primary calling as seriously as we should... In our churches we are juvenile in many ways at points where we ought to be adult.¹

This is how one of the greatest conservative evangelical theologians of the twentieth century diagnoses our present moment in the church.

He doesn't talk about our methods of evangelism or the inadequacy of our social engagement. He doesn't talk about church growth strategies or marketing campaigns or theological precision.

He doesn't do any of these things.

He says that the church isn't taking love as its primary calling as seriously as we should.

And both the world and the church need adults, not juveniles. Debie Thomas puts it beautifully in an essay she wrote on this passage this week:

Jesus follows... with an exhilarating and terrifying promise: "By this everyone will know." Meaning, love is the litmus test of Christian witness. Our love for each other is how the world will know who we are and whose we are. Our love for each other is how the world will see, taste, touch, hear, and find Jesus. It's through our love that we will embody Jesus, make Jesus relatable, possible, plausible, to a dying world.

I can't speak for you, but this makes me tremble. What Jesus seems to be saying is that if we fail to love one another, the world won't know what it needs to know about God, and in the terrible absence of that knowing, it will believe falsehoods that break God's heart. I.e: that the whole Jesus thing is a sham. That there really is no transformative

¹ <http://digital.faithtoday.ca/faithtoday/20140102?pg=1#pg1>

power in the resurrection. That God is a mean, angry, vindictive parent, determined only to shame and punish his children. That the universe is a cold, meaningless place, ungoverned by love. That the Church is only a flawed and hypocritical institution—not Christ’s living, breathing, healing body on earth.

Such is the power we wield in our decisions to love or not love. Such are the stakes involved in how we choose to respond to Jesus’s dying wish, hope, prayer, and commandment. Such is the responsibility we shoulder, whether we want to or not.²

I want to end with one final word.

Earlier, I said “this is how the world will know what a “real” follower of Jesus looks like.

Perhaps you bristled at this.

Is he suggesting that unless we perfectly and consistently exhibit the sacrificial servant love of Jesus, then we aren’t real Christians?! But who can do that besides Jesus? We all fall short, don’t we?

You were right to bristle. My words thus far could very well leave the impression that unless we are loving one another perfectly, we are not “real Christians.”

So, I want to be clear that this is not what I am saying. The language of the “litmus test” is a kind of provocative way of putting things, meant to grab our attention and make us ask hard questions.

But none of us in this room would count as “real Christians” on this calculus, not least the person standing behind the pulpit!

I think it’s important to remember that the command to “love one another as I have loved you” is sandwiched between descending to wash his disciples’ feet, as I’ve mentioned, and a prediction of betrayal.

This is what comes immediately after our text this morning—Peter breathlessly declares his

² <https://www.journeywithjesus.net/lectionary-essays/current-essay?id=2216>

allegiance to Jesus... and Jesus says, “Really? You’re going to betray me three times before tomorrow morning.”

Jesus knows us very well.

He knows that our hearts are moved and inspired and bewildered by a Saviour who would stoop to wash our feet. He knows that we *want* to love like this.

But he also knows that we will betray him, and that this kind of love will so often be beyond us.

He knows how easily and how naturally we turn the law of love which is meant to liberate into another oppressive burden.

And I don’t want to do that this morning.

If you walk away from this sermon with a grim sense of not being enough—*Oh man, I guess I gotta roll up my sleeves and do a better job of loving my fellow Christians to make Jesus happy!*—then I will have failed you.

It’s important to remember that Jesus spoke these words to betrayers—to those who *had* betrayed him in small ways, and to those who would go on to betray him in big ways.

And that Jesus has very specific things to say to betrayers. Things like: “Peace be with you.” And “Do you love me?” And “Feed my sheep.”

With Jesus, there is always grace, always a chance to try again, always another opportunity to be loved into loving better.

And I think we must also remember that Jesus doesn’t say, “love one another as I have *told* you” but “as I have *shown* you.”

We won’t love better by being told to love better. I can stand up here and say that the church needs to love each other better until I’m blue in the face.

I believe this, but it won’t do any good.

Until each one of us is convinced that this really *is* how God has loved us and how God loves us still—sacrificially, to the point of death, and with great humility—then our lives will not become instruments of this kind of love.

Love comes as a response to love, not a finger-wagging lecture. This is true in our marriages, in our relationships with our kids, in our friendships.

It is true in the church. It is true of our relationship to God.

We love as he first loved us.

Last week, Phil referred to the death of Jean Vanier, the founder of L'Arche. I was fascinated to read these words in a tribute published in *Christianity Today*:

In the final years of his life... Vanier was repeatedly asked the question of what he would think of being made a saint. He always dismissed the idea. He explains that he really just wanted to be a friend of Jesus, someone who exemplifies a beautiful life of love and humility.³

May the world look at the church—and our church—and see a community of people who are seeking always to love well, in imitation of our friend, Jesus, and in response to his life-giving and life-sustaining commandment.

Amen.



³ <https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2019/april-web-only/jean-vanier-died-larche-community-tribute.html>