More Than Being Right
John 13:31–35

When I was a kid, I wanted to be a ninja.

Not the silent, shuriken-throwing, smoke-bomb-hurling kind from Saturday morning cartoons—but a Bible ninja. Specifically, an ***apologetics*** ninja. Apologetics is the practice of trying to defend God against against attack from God's enemies.

I wanted to master every slick comeback to confound atheists, Mormons, and anyone unfortunate enough to believe the Bible wasn't God's love letter dipped in gold leaf and bound by angels.

I thought that protecting God from the predations of the faceless hordes of the godless through the proper application of an irresistible theological smackdown occupied the most enviable sphere of Christian vocation. I so wanted to be Batman with a bullet—a suitably cross-shaped bullet, to be sure, but a bullet

nevertheless. It wasn't about love, I realize now. It was about winning.

It seems to me now that much of my early faith life was consumed with getting it right, with ***being*** right. I thought that's what was required of me to be a good Christian.

But then you read something like John 13, and suddenly Jesus kicks the legs out from under your theological aspirations.

Think about our text this morning. It's the night before Jesus dies. The Last Supper is winding down. Judas has just left to betray him, and Jesus knows it. The disciples are confused, probably scared. The air is thick with tension and grief. In this moment, when you'd think Jesus would be giving out final instructions about doctrine or strategy or survival, Jesus gives them something completely different.

He talks about ***love***.

Not just ***any*** love, but a ***specific*** kind of love. A love that would become their calling card, their signature, their unmistakable mark in the world.

Listen again to what he says in verses 34–35: "A new commandment I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another."

Notice what he ***doesn't*** say. He doesn't say, "People will know you're my disciples by your ability to spout Scripture references at the drop of a hat." Or, "By your righteous indignation at culture's moral decay." Or even, "By your strongly worded letters to the editor."

No. Jesus says, "By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have ***love*** for one another."

Cue awkward silence.

I used to think love was soft. Vague. A word cross-stitched onto throw pillows in grandma’s sitting room. But the kind of love Jesus is talking about isn’t squishy or sweet. It’s the kind of love that just hours earlier—kneels and scrubs the dust from someone else’s feet—feet that will walk out the door hunting betrayal.

Think about what had just happened in that room. Jesus—the Rabbi, the Teacher, the one they called Lord—had taken off his outer garments, wrapped a towel around his waist, and washed his disciples' feet. This was servant’s work. Humiliating work. Work so degrading that it would never be done by anyone, even a step above you on the social scale—let alone by someone you were certain was the Messiah.

And yet there was Jesus, washing Judas’s feet. Washing Peter’s feet—the same Peter who would deny him three times before the

rooster crowed. Washing the feet of those who would all abandon him within hours.

This isn’t the kind of love you find on the Hallmark channel. This isn’t self-care love. This is love that costs everything and expects nothing in return.

In our world, we’ve seen love weaponized in ways that would make Judas blush. We’ve turned it into a tool of control, a way to maintain power while appearing virtuous.

We’ve ***seen*** that kind of love, haven’t we? The kind that says to our queer siblings, “We love you, but just don’t talk about it out loud.
”

The kind that says to immigrants, “We love you, but only if you don’t look too much different from us, and certainly not in our neighborhood.”

The kind that says to the poor, “We love you, but you’ve got to prove you’re deserving first, and then we’d rather not have to look at you.”

It’s the kind of “love” that builds walls while declaring them bridges. The kind that says, “I’m telling you this for your own good” while pushing people further into the margins. The kind that wraps itself in a flag, hoists a Bible, and calls itself “pro-life”–but only if that life looks, believes, and behaves a certain way.

This isn’t the love Jesus commanded. This is love’s twisted cousin, the opposite of love … dressed up in Sunday clothes.

Jesus’s love doesn’t come with conditions or fine print. It doesn’t require people to clean up their act before receiving it. His love meets people exactly where they are—in the grime and mess of real life—and says, “You belong.”

Jesus calls this a "new commandment." But wait … didn't the Hebrew Scriptures already ***command*** love? Leviticus 19:18 says, "Love your neighbor as yourself." So what's new about this?

The difference is profound. Jesus doesn't just say, "Love one another," he says, "Love one another … as I have loved you."

This isn't love as our culture understands it. This is love measured by the cross. Love that washes feet and breaks bread with betrayers.

"As I have loved you …" present tense, ongoing action. Not just the love he showed them at the Last Supper, but the love he would show them the next day when Caesar whacked him because he challenged Caesar on their behalf—on behalf of all those who've been humiliated and exploited by the folks in power.

When Jesus says this love will be a sign that marks his disciples, he's not talking about an additional nice thing we do to ease our

consciences. He’s talking about the ***primary*** thing, the fundamental way we engage with the world.

In John’s Gospel, signs aren’t just miracles; they’re revelations of who Jesus is. When Jesus turns water into wine, calms the storm, or feeds the five thousand, these aren’t just displays of power. They’re windows into his character, previews of the world God is creating.

Our love for one another is supposed to be like that—a sign, a window, a preview of what God’s new reign of peace and justice looks like. When people see Jesus' followers loving each other across racial lines, economic lines, political lines, they should see a glimpse of heaven breaking into earth.

But here’s the thing: signs point ***beyond*** themselves. A road sign showing “Chicago: 30 miles” isn’t Chicago; it points ***toward*** Chicago. The love we share points ***beyond*** itself to the source of

all love. It should make people ask, “Why do these strange people love like this? What’s their secret?”

Because, let’s be honest: love like this is dangerous.

It’s dangerous because it threatens the systems we’ve built to protect ourselves from vulnerability, because it refuses to play by the rules of power and privilege. It’s dangerous because it invites people ***in***, rather than keeping them ***out***.

Jesus' kind of love got him killed. It challenged the religious establishment, threatened the political status quo, and made powerful people very uncomfortable. When you love people the way Jesus loves—without regard to whether you think they deserve it or not—you become a threat to every system that depends on hierarchy and exclusion.

The religious leaders of Jesus' day felt threatened because he welcomed tax collectors and sinners. He ate with the wrong

people, touched the untouchable, and treated women as equals. His love disrupted the boundaries constructed to keep everyone frozen in place—with the folks in the front of the line staying in front of the line, and the folks in back … staying in back.

Nothing has changed. Love that truly follows Jesus's pattern still disrupts, still threatens, still costs us something.

Fine. But what does this love look like practically? How does this love look with shoes on?

For one thing, Jesus didn't love from a distance. He got close enough to wash feet, to touch lepers, to eat with outcasts. Our love must do the same. It's about showing up, about being willing to get our hands dirty. It's sitting with people in their pain instead of offering platitudes from arm's length.

Moreover, it's about listening. Really listening. Not listening to respond or correct or fix, but listening to ***understand***. Jesus

asked questions. He paid attention to people's stories. He saw them as individuals, not cases to be solved or souls to be saved.

Jesus' love is also about choosing powerlessness, which is perhaps the hardest part. Jesus had ***access*** to power but chose to ***kneel*** and serve. That's how we're supposed to do it. It means choosing to lift others up instead of climbing over them, using our privilege to create space for others rather than protecting our position.

Finally, it costs something, requires something from us. Time, comfort, convenience, maybe even reputation. Real love is never free. Someone always pays the price for love. The question is whether ***we're*** willing to pay it.

One of the things I learned from my Bible ninja days is that being right without love is like playing a perfect symphony to an empty concert hall. You might hit every note flawlessly, but without a

connection, without an audience to move and inspire, you've missed the point entirely.

But love doesn't mean we abandon truth. It means we hold truth with humility and speak it with grace, recognizing that truth without love is just noise. And truth expressed in love has the power to transform hearts in ways that argument never could.

Jesus is more interested in transformation than being right. He wants hearts changed, not just minds convinced. And hearts are changed through love, not the most compelling arguments.

When we get ***this*** right—when we love as Jesus loved—something miraculous happens. Communities are transformed. Relationships heal. Hope is born in unexpected places.

I've seen it happen. I've watched congregations become hospital zones for broken people instead of museums for collecting religious memorabilia. I've witnessed communities cross racial,

economic, and political lines to love their neighbors. I've seen love resurrect dead relationships and bring healing to generations of pain.

This love has power because it reflects the heart of God. When we love sacrificially, unconditionally, radically, we become living signs of what God intends for everyone. We embody the good news in ways that words and arguments alone never could.

So maybe it's time to hang up our theological black belts. Maybe we should stop treating following Jesus like a chess match or a purity contest or a branding exercise.

What if we stopped asking, "How do we win this argument?" and started asking, "How do we love these people?"

What if we believed that love really is the most powerful force in the universe—not weakness ***disguised*** as love, not emotional

manipulation ***called*** love, but the real thing: costly, sacrificial, transformative love that thinks of others first?

Living this way isn't easy. It means turning away from all the ways we've weaponized faith and marginalized people in God's name. It means learning to see people as Jesus sees them, not as projects or enemies or obstacles, but as beloved children of God.

It means creating communities where everyone has a seat at the table, where masks can come off, where people can be who they really are about their struggles without fear of judgment.

It means spending less time proving we're right and more time being present.

Jesus leaves us with one fundamental question: Will people know we belong to him by how we love?

Not by our doctrine (important as that is). Not by our buildings (beautiful as they may be). Not by our programs (valuable as they can be). Not by our partisan commitments (passionate as we may be).

But by our love. Pure, simple, messy, costly love.

Because if we don't get ***that*** right, does anything else really matter?

In a world full of hate, fear, and division, love isn't just our calling … it's our superpower, our secret weapon. It's our most authentic sermon, the sign that points the way home.

And maybe–just maybe–if we learn to love like Jesus, people will see that love and say, "Oh. They must belong to Jesus."

And in that recognition, the reign of God comes a little closer to earth. Hearts open a little wider. Healing flows a little deeper.

That’s what love does. That’s why it matters. That’s why it’s worth risking everything to get it right—more than just ***being*** right.

–Amen.