

“Everyone Will Know”

John 13:31-35

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The rabbis teach us that everyone gets three names: the name our parents give us at our birth, the nick name our peers give us on the playground, and the name we make for ourselves in life. Somehow, it's that third name that matters the most.

The same can be said for a local church. There is the official name given at our christening, The Congregational Church in South Glastonbury. Then there are the nick names; South Church, South Congo, or simply South. And then there is the name we make for ourselves. Jesus has something to say about this third name. He says in effect, “I want you to be known by the love you have for each other.” That is the standard. There is no other.

There is a great scene in the film, *Forest Gump*, where young Forest has shed his leg braces and he is running everywhere all the time. Instead of walking or moseying or loping, Forest runs! As he runs past a downtown shop, one older man turns to another and says, “He's a running fool.” That's his reputation! That's the name he is making for himself. I was thinking how awesome it would be to be standing over at the bus stop across the street, listening in on the conversation between two commuters. One says to the other, ‘Look over there at that South Congo Church.’ And the other says, ‘Yep, they're a bunch of lovin' fools!’

As I began to reflect on our Gospel text for today, I began to wonder what it would look like if we actually did really love each other, all the time, day in and day out.

Beyond the picture of everybody hugging and saying sweet things to each other at the close of a worship hour, what would life look like if we were all to take this standard to heart? Three pictures come to mind. Let me describe them briefly.

On Friday night, I attended the 30th anniversary celebration of the Inter-Community Mental Health Association, a ministry hatched right here in our fellowship room in 1977. I attended that celebration in part because of its founding at South Church, in part because my sister lived her whole life with a mental illness known as depression, and in part because mental illness is still grossly misunderstood and because many who live with mental illness still live outside the circle of neighborly love, still live under a cloud of judgment. Love doesn't make mental illness go away. But when love is extended to the one with a bi-polar disorder or an anxiety attack there is a movement toward wholeness, a movement toward salvation, a movement toward the community Jesus had the courage to imagine.

I missed an opportunity last weekend on the Confirmation retreat. In the dining hall which we shared with several other groups, I overheard one of the New York retreaters say in regard to the re-arrangement of tables, "What retard did this?" I cringed. I felt the anger rise in my chest. But then I failed to confront this person with love. I had this opportunity to love someone toward wholeness but my anger got in the way. I wish I had that hand to play over. I'd like to think I might have found language to love that individual into letting go of vocabulary that wounds. It seems to me that when we love each other, we use language that builds up and does not tear down. When we love each other, those with mental illness feel included, finally, and not excluded. When we love each other, the one who holds a prejudice surrenders that prejudice. So, my first picture is one where the circle of love is drawn wide enough to include all those living with a mental illness.

The second picture of loving one another comes from the concert here Friday night. I sneaked out of the Mental Health event in time to catch several numbers by the Central Connecticut State University Singers. As I listened to that choir, I found myself swept away by the power of music. Whether singing or listening, I knew it would be impossible for anyone to leave the sanctuary that night and go and do some act of violence against another human being. It just could not have happened! I guess you could say I felt loved in that setting. I know that some music wounds and incites people to do violence, but the music I heard Friday night melted me in a way that I imagine the metal in a hand gun melting into liquid steel and being re-forged into a gardening fork. I thought if we could just squeeze the entire world into this meeting house to hear a concert of sacred music, a concert of love songs, violence would come to a halt in Darfur; the troops would come home from Iraq; and people from the suburbs would be found on the sidewalks of Hartford, Connecticut after dark.

When we love each other, we lay down those weapons that breed fear and rob us of joy. Music composed for love's own sake has the power to disarm the armies and the gangs and even the Hatfields and the McCoys. Rumi, the great Muslim mystic, invites us into that time and place where everything is music, that place of peace. It's hard to do violence to another human being when you're singing a love song!

I love it when children return from summer camp singing those old camp songs we learned ourselves at campfires waiting for the somemores to be ready. I love it when they come home singing, "We will work with each other, we will work side by side; we will guard each one's dignity and save each one's pride. They'll know we are Christians by our love, by our love, yes they'll know we are Christians by our love."

This third picture arises out of the rally yesterday in Bushnell Park. It was a rally to call for health care coverage for all of Connecticut's citizens. Three days ago I had my teeth cleaned and the dentist was able to take care of one little spot of decay all in the same visit. I paid the co-pay amount and headed off to work as if all were right with the world. I felt fortunate to have dental insurance. But as I turned onto route 17 from the New London Turnpike it dawned on me that hundreds of thousands of my neighbors don't share that joy, don't have access to that quality of care. I even got to choose the flavor of the tooth cleaning cream: I picked cinnamon!

To love one another is to go to bat for those who do not have jobs that happen to offer a basic health benefit. I left home at 9:00 a.m. and rode my bike to Bushnell Park. I wanted my presence to be an expression of love for my neighbors. I wasn't making a political statement or being politically correct. I just had this knowing that to love one another means to do whatever it takes to achieve this goal of universal health care. Whether you live in Bridgeport or Greenwich, New Haven or Simsbury, Hartford or Glastonbury, you ought to be able to go to bed at night knowing you have a place to go when you get sick, knowing that if you need surgery it won't matter if you have a card in your wallet or not, knowing that if your child has proper dental hygiene at age four she won't need oral surgery at age forty.

To love one another is sometimes to cry out for the other to have those basics we take for granted, basics such as access to the health care system.

In the Gospel story, Jesus huddles the disciples closely. He is a man of few words. He says to them, “By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.” Surely the teaching is meant for all the ages; surely the teaching is intended for South Congo, “By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.”

In the greatest of hope, Amen!