

“Everyone Will Know”

John 13:31-35

When people hear and believe that God loves us, we are affected by the free flow of God’s grace and love. In our Stephens Ministry training manual we are taught to identify the seven signs of God’s activity in people’s lives. These are seven ways that people are changed when we hear and believe that God loves us.

These signs overlap somewhat; no one shows these signs perfectly, and everyone will show some of them more than others. Nevertheless, they are present to some extent in lives of faith. When they are noticeably absent or distorted, that is a sign that people are having trouble hearing and believing that God loves us.

1. Awareness of God’s Presence

As people hear and believe the promise of God’s love, we usually have some sense of God’s presence and care for us. Whether we experience God in public worship, private meditation, a small group, or while pondering the majesty of his creation, we have a sense that God is real, that he truly loves us, that he hears our prayers, and that we can count on him to care for us. Danette and I were aware of God’s presence when a couple of Monday’s ago, we worshipped in the impressive Notre Dame basilica with about 100 students starting finals week.

2. Faith

Faith is a way of living that demonstrates trust in God. People who hear and believe that God loves us tend to live in ways that show that belief. We have confidence because we know that God is caring for us. We are able to take risks and embrace change.

As Divinity's Call Committee is formed and we do a congregational survey determining our strengths and weaknesses, we prepare to embrace change as we call a second pastor.

Jesus talked about such faith when he said, "So do not worry, saying, 'What shall we eat' or 'what shall we wear?' For the pagans run after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them. But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well'" (Matthew 6:31-33). People with faith in God tend to live as Jesus taught, because we know God will take care of us, no matter what.

3. Hope

To hope is to believe in the possibility of a favorable future; it is the opposite of worry, fear, and despair. Hopeful people live positive and fruitful lives. Hope implies a certain discontent with the way things are and propels people to work for a more desirable, God-pleasing future. People who hear and believe the good news about Jesus' resurrection will hope in God, even when all human reasons for hope are gone. We hope and pray for an end to the war in Ukraine.

4. Love

When people hear and believe that God loves us, our response is to love God and others. Jesus said, "By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another" (John 13:35). Jesus identified love as the most important command (Mark 12:28-31), and Paul called it the first fruit of the Spirit (Galatians 5:22). Paul wrote, "The greatest of these is love" (1 Corinthians 13:13b), and, "The entire law is summed up in a single command: 'Love your neighbor as yourself'" (Galatians 5:14).

As the Holy Spirit enables people to hear and believe that God loves us, the Spirit also helps believers grow to love God more deeply and to serve the needs of others ahead of self. Love is the energy of the Spirit that empowers God's people to extend ourselves for the spiritual growth of others as well as of ourselves.

5. Gratitude and Openness to Grace

People who hear and believe that God loves us are grateful people. We remain open to receiving God's love without thinking we have earned it. When we ask God to forgive us, we believe that he does, and we don't cling to our guilt. We know that God loves us because of who Jesus is and what he did and in spite of who we are and what we have done.

As a result we live gratefully. We regularly recognize the daily gifts and favors God gives us – everything from the beauty of a sunrise to help in a dangerous situation – and we know that those are not just happen-stances but expressions of God's never-ending love. The more we recognize God's minute-by-minute love the more grateful we are. We are grateful that Divinity is weathering the pandemic storm, despite losing 11 members, 10 in nursing homes, we stand together on stable ground.

6. Repentance and Humility

When people hear and believe that God loves us, we become free to admit our faults and to turn away from our sins. To repent is to turn back from behaviors that are disobedient to God, that hurt others, damage relationships, or are self-destructive. God's love frees people from slavery to such behaviors so that we reject sin and turn toward God's abundant life.

Repentance is an enemy of false pride. In *My Utmost for His Highest*, Oswald Chambers speaks again and again about surrendering to God the right to oneself.

That's what Jesus did when he "did not consider equality with God something to be grasped" (Philippians 2:6b), and that's what Christians do when we humbly give up our rights in order to serve God and care for others. Repentance means turning away from one's own rights and surrendering to God's will. That is true humility. True humility is giving away our time and talent to serve on a Call Committee, to serve refugees, to serve as a Stephen Minister, Parish Nurse, on altar care, on a ministry board, making music, or whatever it is God is calling you to do, surrendering to God's will.

7. Community

Those who hear and believe the promise of God's gracious love understand that God has adopted us and that we are now part of a very big family. We are in community with all God's other children and with all humankind. While we maintain our individuality, we don't let it selfishly rule our behavior and relationships. We seek out others with whom to share our gifts, our lives, and our dreams.

These people feel connected rather than isolated from other people. We rejoice in being with others, and we recognize Jesus' presence in others. We are comfortable with people who are different from us, knowing that our connection with others as God's beloved creatures is stronger than any differences. We reach out to other people and care for them.

Now think about where Jesus told his disciples, "I give you a new commandment, that you love one another . . . By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another."

The phrase "everyone will know" tells us that not only the recipients of a loving action, but also those who witness it, know we are in the presence of a follower of Jesus.

Previously, when Jesus talked about love, he was talking about a "love-your-neighbor" kind of love. This love extended *outward* from the circle of believers to whoever was in need (as the Good Samaritan parable illustrates). Here Jesus is commanding the disciples to love *one another*.

In other words, he's telling us that when we act in loving ways toward each other in the faith community, we will reflect his love for us.

And remember that earlier in the evening, before Jesus shared this teaching, he washed the disciples' feet to illustrate graphically for us that loving someone means that we should serve one another.

In effect, Jesus was creating a group, later to be known as *the church*, whose primary identifying characteristic is that we love each other, even expressing that in service to one another. Beyond that, the group can be widely diverse in ethnicity, gender, language, nationality, age, political persuasion and most of the other things that we use to label or identify people today.

But the disciples' *love for one another is the essential identifying mark*. As John explained it elsewhere, "Those who love God must love our brothers and sisters also" (1 John 4:21). As Jesus himself said, "Whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother" (Mark 3:35). Love says a lot about a community like the church. It marks those who express such love as followers of Jesus. And it says that we know God.

Love is the mark.

So how does this play out with us who are disciples today? Is the presence of Jesus recognizable in the ways in which we love one another within the faith community?

Unfortunately, there are plenty of tales of church life that illustrate the opposite, starting with silly accounts about church members who behave badly when visitors sit in "our" pew. A typical story: One pastor tells of an aging adult Sunday school class with a shrinking membership that was asked to move to a smaller room. A growing young-adult class needed the larger space more urgently. The aging group refused; it was *our* room!

There are also anecdotes about newcomers not returning to a congregation because they didn't feel welcome, narratives about women's groups who put locks on the kitchen cabinets so other groups would not use the kitchen and mess it up.

No mark of love in all of this.

But, let's not discount the good work the church is already doing. Let's remember that congregations often manage to put up with, work around or calm disruptive members -- things that most businesses won't tolerate. This shows that we've learned *something* about loving one another, even loving some of our fellow worshipers who are harder to love than others.

Let's also not forget that –

- Many children got their first real understanding that we might have something to offer to the world when we praised them in a Sunday School class or for singing in the youth choir which will hopefully make a comeback this fall.

- Some teenagers heard their calling to be disciples of Jesus through the example of a youth leader, during a mission trip, while attending a Bible Camp or because of the acceptance they found at church when some things weren't going so well at home.

- Some people agree to participate in mission projects or in various ministries because a fellow church member asks them to, something they might be more reluctant to do if the request came from say, another parent on our kid's soccer team.

- The funeral dinners; visits to the shut-ins from laypeople; emergency, but quiet, gifts of financial support to members with sudden need; prayers for one another during times of illness or grief or concern; strong friendships between some members who wouldn't even have met if they hadn't come to church, and Stephen Ministry relationships are all examples of Christian love.

Some followers of Jesus help people by volunteering in our nursery so young parents can worship in peace. Our parish nurses make follow-up phone calls when our hospitalized come home to see if they need a dinner or other help.

There are a lot of things that congregations, even struggling congregations, get right. Often, followers of Jesus really do express our love for one another through service and support. Jesus said it was "a new commandment," indicating that it's not optional for Christians.

In practice, of course, while we may be able to serve each other without hesitation, we aren't likely to be able to have the same level of fellowship with *everyone*.

Years ago, the great Quaker writer Thomas Kelly said, "No single person can hold *all* dedicated souls within his [or her] compass in steadfast Fellowship with equal vividness." (He considered the Fellowship so important that he wrote it with a capital "F"!) Kelly went on to acknowledge that there are *degrees* of Fellowship. Although all might be within the bonds of love, some are nearer to us individually than others. Some of these who are not so near us might be nearer to others, however, making various groupings in the church that overlap.

"The total effect in a living church," said Kelly, "[is] sufficient intersection of the bonds to form a supporting, caring network of love for the whole of [humankind]. Where the Fellowship is lacking, the church ... is lacking and the kingdom of God has not yet come. For these bonds of divine love and caring are the stuff of the kingdom of God. [Those who are] in the Fellowship [are] in the kingdom of God."

Our loving one another is something that tells those outside the church that God's love for us as expressed through us is real.

Jesus commanded us to love one another. Let's be glad for the ways we already do that and for the happy results that follow. And let's take up the places where we fail to be as loving to one another as we ought, and figure out how we can do better.

May the peace of God . . .

#631 – Love Divine, All Loves Excelling