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St. John's Lutheran Church – Kimball, NE (dual parish w/Immanuel, Burns, WY)

Maundy Thursday (ABC, alt.)

April 13, 2017

Text: John 13:1–17; 31b–35

Grace be to you and peace from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

Jesus said, “By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another” (John 13:35). These words of our Lord are often invoked by well-meaning Christians to justify downplaying doctrine and to minimize faithful adherence to the teachings of Holy Scripture. Christianity, so this kind of thinking goes, is about deeds of love not creeds of doctrinal statements. Like so many errors, such sentiment has a grain of truth in it. God's Word has plenty to say about our acts of love which we ought to be showing our neighbors.

However, this kind of thinking sets up a false dilemma, as if, somehow adherence and confession of sound doctrine is antithetically opposed to deeds of Christian love. Or works of virtue and love undermine and destroy right doctrine. Nothing could be further from the truth. Right believing and right living go hand in glove. There is no conflict.

People will know us as Christian disciples by the love we show toward one another. The question becomes, “How do we show that love to one another, as Christians?” To answer that question with “We show our Christian love by doing various good deeds of charity to the poor and needy, to defend the weak and helpless, and to support various social endeavors that elevate the plight of the downtrodden” misses the point of what Jesus is saying. At best, it puts the proverbial cart before the horse. Anybody can do those kinds of works of charity, Christian, Muslim, Jew, Hindu, atheist, agnostic, whomever. But Jesus said people will know that we are His disciples, that is Christian disciples, by the love we show to one another, that is, to other Christians. “By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another” (John 13:35).

What is this love that we show to one another and by which we are known? The context of John 13 helps us answer this question. John 13:1–2a, “Now before the Feast of Passover, when Jesus knew that his hour had come to depart out of this world to the Father, having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end. During supper...” Which supper? The Passover supper in which Jesus fulfills and completes

when He institutes the Lord's Supper. It is in the context of the institution and celebration of the Lord's Supper that Jesus says, "A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another: just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another. By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another" (vs. 34–35).

Just hours before Jesus would begin His intensive suffering and crucifixion, the Lord desires to leave behind to His beloved Church "the greatest memorial of His love... The Lord Supper is a feast of love not only because Christ Himself instituted it out of burning love for His own ... (but also because His Supper is) the source and bond of the most intimate, brotherly love among Christians... Because we Christians partake of the consecrated bread that makes us partakers of Christ body, and the consecrated cup that makes us partakers of Christ's blood, we all become one body and one spirit, almost one person, one individual... All partake of the one and the same complete body of Christ and the one and the same complete blood of Christ. They thus become intimately united with one another as their body with their soul. Is not the Holy Supper, then really a feast of love? Beyond a doubt" (C.F.W. Walther, *Gospel Sermons*, p. 210).

Receiving the body and blood of Jesus is a feast of love because the Lord Jesus gives Himself to us for our eternal salvation. He gives us the forgiveness of sins which He won for us on Calvary's cross. By the glory of His resurrection on Easter morning, our Lord forever secured our justification before God the Father. No greater love could Jesus give than Himself.

Jesus took bread. He gave thanks and broke it saying "This is My body." Jesus took the cup of blessing. He gave thanks and gave it to the disciples saying, "Take drink. This is My blood of the new testament." This body and blood are given and shed for you and all Christians in divine, holy love for the forgiveness of sins. In the Holy Supper, we receive Jesus in the most literal and tangible way. This body and blood are actual pledges of the forgiveness He secured for us in His death and resurrection. It's as if Jesus were saying to us, "This, My body, and this My blood, are the actual payment for your sins and judgment. I give them to you, beloved child of My Father, as the actual pledge and security for your eternal wellbeing. Whoever believes My Word actually receives what I promise: forgiveness of sins and eternal life.

Receiving the body and blood of Jesus is a feast of love because each communicant, who has received Christ's love in the Holy Supper, participates with one another in the same divine love. The body and blood of Jesus that I receive is the same body and blood of Jesus that each one of you receives. We participate in Christ's love together

through His body and blood. We share a “body-and-blood fellowship with one another...Because of the presence and participation of the body of Christ, the Holy Supper is a meal of the most intimate fellowship and, therefore, at the same time, the highest love-meal. Just as fervent love is demanded, so fervent love is delivered. We all come together, as children of the same family, to the table of our common, heavenly Father...We are all the same, in that we each eat the same earthly and heavenly bread and drink the same earthly and heavenly drink...No one receives a better food and better drink than the other. All receive the same Jesus, and with Him, the same righteousness” and the same holy love (C.F.W. Walther, cited in *Treasury of Daily Prayer*, p. 173).

“All people will know that you are my disciples if you have love for one another.” That love for Jesus and for one another is most concretely manifested when we receive the body and blood of Jesus in the Lord’s Supper. Having been so loved by Jesus and having shared His love with each other in consecrated bread and wine, we also show love to one another with acts of service, love, and care. But it all begins with Jesus. With His love given and shed for us in bread and wine. With His love that we receive and share with one another in Holy Communion.

This, in part, is why the Church since the days of the apostles has celebrated the Lord’s Supper at least weekly, every Sunday. And then also on other feast days, like tonight. And according to Acts 2:42, that devotion to the Lord’s Supper was joined by devotion to apostolic doctrine, prayers, and offerings. By worshipping in such a faithful, consistent way, we are known for the love we have for one another: the divine love given, received, and shared in Holy Supper. And then manifesting itself in the rest of life.

It is not accidental that one of the prayers we pray together at the end of our weekly celebration of the Lord’s Supper says, “we implore You that of Your mercy You would strengthen us through the same in faith toward You and in fervent love toward one another.”

A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another: just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another...

✠ In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. ✠ Amen.

Now the peace of God which surpasses all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus unto life everlasting. Amen.