

famous for a kind of love that makes no sense to a world that is perishing. In fact, Paul says it will look downright foolish to those who don't know Jesus and his promises.

And the key is that Jesus says, "Just as I have loved you, you should love each other."

And maybe that statement sends his disciples back into their memory banks. Jesus probably looked around the room and looked into the eyes of each one, and he didn't need to say a word.

He looked at Matthew and he didn't need to say, "Matthew do you remember how I loved you?" Matthew, do you remember the kind of life you lived before you met me? Do you remember how you were a tax collector and how you used and abused others for your own personal gain? Matthew, how did I love you? I called you to follow me. And all the other disciples grumbled, complained about you, but I made you one of my own. Matthew, go and do likewise.

And Nathaniel, do you remember how you treated me when we first met? Do you remember how arrogant you were and how you insulted my hometown? Nathaniel, I don't need to remind you of how I responded, do I? I told you to "Come and see." I want you to treat everyone you meet like I treated you.

And Peter. Oh, Peter. Where do I start with you Peter? Because you so often got it wrong. You were so eager, and you always said and did the dumbest of things and you drove us all nuts. And yet I was so patient with you. I want you to be like that for everyone you meet.

And you know what, Peter? Tomorrow you're really going to let me down. You're going to deny even knowing me. But Peter, what I am going to do tomorrow, is for you. Go and do likewise."

And then he comes to you and me. And Jesus looks us in our eyes, and he says, "friend I have been so patient with you. You have not always done as I asked, but even so, I

loved you to death. I forgive you for what you have done and left undone, but now I want you to love others in the very same way."

There is nothing "natural" about this way of being in the world. People will not come up with this on their own. Look at a two-year old toddler – they do not grasp this as the obvious way of being human.

Jesus' ethic isn't natural but when the world sees it, it will authenticate all of the rest of what Jesus said. Or, it will undermine it.

And friends, that's why the world needs the church so very badly these days. Not because we always get this right. And certainly not because we're particularly good at it. But simply because this is the only place in the world that has this particular motivation – resulting a different way of being.

And so, the church is where we teach and practice this incredible ethic. Why? Because our love is the point? No, because sacrificial love is evidence that what we believe is true.

Our legitimacy in a non-believing culture is not found in our beliefs, our arguments, or our morality. No, it comes from our display of a Jesus-level love.

We believe in one God who came to reconcile sinners to himself. We are his ambassadors. We will show whether that reality changes us or not. And if not, then it's probably not worth the effort.

Jesus is always waiting to pour out his Spirit onto a church that is serious about this mission. He's just waiting to accomplish great things through a community that is living out radical love in a way that will amaze those around us.

And that's the marvelous mission we're called to. Selby United Church is a launching pad for love – a sure sign that all Jesus' promises are true.

Thanks be to God, Amen.

“Known for it: Love”

May 5th, 2024 — Selby United Church — Scripture: John 13:31-38

By Rev. Mike Putnam

Let me ask you, how do you feel about Bell? Because as I talk to folks Bell Canada, one of Canada's largest companies, seems to be an almost universally irritating brand that most of us have had to deal with at one time or another.

Why do we hate Bell so much? Well, probably for a lot of reasons. Maybe it's because they once had monopoly and didn't feel a need to earn their customer's business, or maybe it's because they'd regularly tell you they'd be at your house between the hours of 12:00 and 4:00 pm and then never show up. Or, maybe it's because their products were unreliable and customer service was poor. But I'm pretty sure if we went around the room today most people would have no trouble telling their own Bell story!

Bell's bad reputation results in a brand that people will often do just about anything to avoid. Because brands are about trust. Can I trust this company or organization to do what they say? When people trust brands, they grow. When people don't trust them, they decline.

This morning we're going to think about one of the world's oldest and most trusted brands – Christianity. Christianity offers the biggest and best promises ever made – God's unconditional love and salvation. But it seems that the Christian brand is in decline these days. People don't trust it like they once did.

But Jesus has chosen us as his authenticators of his promises. He sends us out to show and share the good news of his saving love. He's given us marching orders and he's launching his global mission through us.

But sometimes that's a problem. It seems like that strategy might be a little problematic. Because the church in North America was once like a revered hotel or restaurant that has lost its edge. It used to be a welcoming place where people would be treated to an amazing experience, but today the food isn't that great, the service is inconsistent and people who come don't always feel welcome.

On top of that, there's some pretty high-profile Christians who are known more for their politics than their faith, there are many who are famous for who they are against rather than what

they are for, and there are those famous Christians known for their massive moral failures. All of which are causing some pretty major brand confusion.

And so, it's time for the church to refocus, to let some things go and start to manage the brand in new ways. Now let me be clear the message is eternal – we don't need to retool the whole thing. People have tried that in recent history and just based on the evidence, I'd say that has been an abysmal failure.

No, Jesus is clear that our work is not to remake his message to suit our cultures proclivities. The message stays the same – Jesus is the answer to the world's sin problem and we can live in the light of his promises for the future today.

But what does change are the methods. The message is eternal and unchanging but our methods change all the time. The music we sing, the facilities we meet in, the programs and the curriculums we follow change over time. In fact, they have to change because our tastes and preferences change. The problem in that so many churches today is that they have a "horse and buggy kind of model" trying to suit a digital kind of world.

But even then, we should be careful before we race off in our own directions trying to be the "hands and feet of Christ." Because Jesus lays out his brand – he defines four things that he wants his movement to be famous for. And so, over the next four weeks or so we will be looking at the four things that Jesus says should confirm us as his followers by the world.

And think about it – what is it that defines people of various religions and denominations? Often, it's our activities, rituals and practices that define the brand. It's things like appearance – you can pick out an Amish person walking down the street. Often, it's customs or traditions – you know an Eastern Orthodox person because they celebrate Christmas on a different day. Often, it's the food – a Jew won't eat pork, a Hindu won't eat beef, and a Catholic eats fish on Fridays (at least that's a thing from way back).

But interestingly Jesus doesn't seem too interested in any of those traditional religious markers. He has no interest in his movement being famous for what we do or don't do to stand out. He offers no rules about how to stay holy, keep separate

or be distinctive from the rest of the world. Which is shocking when you think about it, because so often these markers become so much of our focus. But instead, he defines his brand by four things – “By these four things people will know you are my disciples,” he says.

A brand is like a shortcut in the mind of the average person. Brands help us to understand a product and often it evokes an emotion. Brands help define a whole group of people and make it clear what they stand for and what they promise.

For example, think of Greenpeace’s brand. What feelings does that brand evoke for you? What kind of person is drawn to that organization?

Now think of the National Rifle Association? What kind of feeling do you get from that brand? Given your life experience, your political leaning and your opinions about modern society we may have some different thoughts about those two brands.

And this is why brands are so powerful. They have the capacity to help people to understand what it’s all about but they also have the capacity to divide, to draw lines and to separate us from others based on our allegiances.

But branding is ultimately about making and keeping promises. If a brand doesn’t keep its promise, it quickly loses trust and declines.

Brands fail for a variety of reasons – sometimes they fail to keep up with new technologies and ways of doing things (think Blockbuster and how they stuck with DVD rentals when digital entertainment was rapidly replacing them), sometimes brands lose focus and start doing things that make no sense to who they are as a brand (think Sears and how they got into too many things like Real Estate, Travel Agencies and Insurance and lost focus on their core business), and sometimes people lose trust in the brand (think Facebook and how they sell your data).

But strong brands clearly stand for something and they act consistently with what they say they’re all about. And this morning Jesus wants us to know that the brand for his movement is pretty clear. His brand rises and falls on how we behave, and he wants us to be famous for four things.

Sure, times change and cultures are different. Sure, technologies shift and opinions change, but Jesus says four different times, “And by

this everyone will know that you are my disciples.” What are those four things? What’s Jesus’ brand? And, are we helping or hindering it?

Well, over the next four weeks or so we will do a bit of an assessment on ourselves, on our church and one the global movement we belong to. But today we begin with the number one marker of a Christian. We start with the thing that should set us apart from all others.

But it’s remarkable that it isn’t our morality, it isn’t our time of the week for worship, it isn’t our views on cultural issues, and it isn’t our ability to win arguments. Instead, our first Jesus-given brand identifier is boiled down to one powerful word – L-O-V-E.

But to my ears that sounds a little cliché, doesn’t it? It sounds too saccharin. Because the word “love” has been put through the wringer. I mean the Beatles sang about it – “All you need is love,” Valentine’s Day promises it, and so many narratives these days confuse it. What does love even mean?

In Greek there are different words for different kinds of love – In English we clumsily throw around one word and no one is really sure what kind of love we’re talking about. I mean, how can we build the entire brand on a word that has become so meaningless.

Well, let’s think through our text this morning and see if we can gain any more clarity. This morning Jesus is moments away from setting in motion his journey to the cross. He has gathered his disciples for a very significant conversation around the Passover meal – a meal that Jesus will re-point to himself as the ultimate example of the sacrificial love of God. He is about to be handed over by Judas and his betrayal is immanent.

Jesus has had many impactful conversations with his disciples, but this is perhaps the most remarkable conversation ever recorded. John devotes four full chapters to this one conversation and it is constantly referred to in Paul’s letters.

Jesus begins, “My children, I will be with you only a little longer. You will look for me, and just as I told the Jews, so I tell you now: Where I am going, you cannot come.”

Jesus is going away and his disciples cannot come. Jesus is doing something that only Jesus can do. He knew what was about to happen: He was going to His death on the cross, and he

would be arrested in mere hours. So, these words are his last.

In the movies last words are always poignant. They are words often whispered – everyone leans in. “Tell my wife I love her,” or “The treasure is buried at such and such a location.” Jesus’ disciples are surely leaning in to hear what will be said next.

“So now I am giving you a new commandment...” Jesus says. What? A new commandment? The last thing these guys need is another commandment. They are Israelites – they have 600 of them! And who was Jesus to amend Moses’ law code anyway? I mean, that’s kind of a big deal. You don’t just change or amend these things. They were thought of as being as unchangeable as God himself. Tacking on another one made no sense.

They lean in even more: “A new commandment I give to 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.”

Um, Jesus...that’s not that new! If Jesus had said everyone should get a certain tattoo that would have been new. But all this build up for a command to love?

We can assume that this was a letdown because Peter doesn’t even address it. He just blows by the new commandment to address Jesus’ departure. As usual, Peter has missed the point.

But what is so new about Jesus’ new command? Well, on the surface, nothing. In fact, this is where people often get confused. They say things like all religions basically teach the same things and this passage is evidence of it. Every religion has some version of the Golden Rule.

But of course, that’s an over simplification of what’s happening here. What Jesus is doing is unlike any other religion in the world. The Gospel – the idea that God came not to judge us and condemn us, but to make a way for us because the curse of sin and death was too great for us to overcome on our own, is absolutely unique to Jesus. Our religion is all about saving love — demonstrated in the finished work of Jesus Christ on the cross.

And frankly, this is where I think our liberal mainline church took a wrong turn. When we say that being a Christian is all about love, and we head off in all directions trying to make the world a better place, we often end up making the world a worse place. Our versions of love are so often distorted, tainted and wrong-headed. And young

people sitting in Sunday school being taught that they should try harder to be nicer and to love, eventually leads them to conclude that their faith has nothing substantive to offer them – so eventually they walk away all together.

But see, that’s why we must not oversimplify. Because at some point, we will all find that we are faced with problems or circumstances we just can’t handle. But if all you think your religion can offer you is a command to love more, then you are not likely to turn to your faith in the midst of your trials. This watered-down version of faith has taught generations of young people that Jesus has nothing to offer other than mother-hood statements about being nicer.

But of course, that’s not what Jesus is saying here. He’s not undermining everything he’s said for the last three years with a simple statement about being loving. What he’s saying is that our brand – the evidence of the truthfulness of the promises Jesus made – will be validated by our love.

Our brand – the Christian movement - has some of the most incredible promises ever made in history. We promise that God loves you despite your failings. We promise that our saviour is here and we can have an everlasting relationship with God through him. We promise that this life isn’t the end of the story but that one day there will be a new heaven and a new earth and we will inhabit it without sin, sorrow or pain. And we promise that ultimately, everything bad will come untrue.

But we need to demonstrate that those things are true somehow. How do we do that? Well, as Jesus heads out the door to go accomplish all of this for us – he tells us that we will show those things to be true by our love.

Now, love will always be important regardless of what you believe about God, it’s part of being human - but it will be a different kind of love. It will be a love that serves us rather than a love that serves others.

But if Jesus’ promises are true then you have nothing but life – in fact, you have life so abundantly that it goes on and on forever – and if that’s true you can love in such a way that makes no sense to those outside that belief system. If you have “life abundant” you can afford to sacrifice, you can waste time, you can invest in lost causes. You can even serve people who are mostly irrelevant to your own life.

But see, that’s only true if the gospel is true. And that’s why Jesus wants his disciples to be