

The first 12 chapters of John's gospel span 3 years. Starting here, the next 5 chapters span one night – Jesus' last night with his disciples.

Unlike in the other three gospels, this last meal Jesus shared with his disciples is not Passover. There are no words of institution. The equivalent of that in John's gospel was the feeding of the 5000 and Jesus' proclamation that he is the bread of life.

The night described here was the night before the Day of Preparation. The Day of Preparation was the day the Passover lambs were slaughtered for the Passover meal the next day. In John's gospel, Jesus dies on the day of Preparation – like the Passover lambs.

This passage and what follows it is all about love. Having loved his own – his disciples – he loved them to the end.

A huge question we Christians are today faced with is what does it mean to be a Christian? Some would say it means supporting a so-called biblical agenda as a nation. They might say we need to structure our society according to biblical values...at least the ones they like.

Jesus is pretty dang clear in this story what it means to be a Christian. Although the lectionary writers didn't include the whole story here's what Jesus says a little later on...

“⁴I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. ³⁵By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.”

In 1966, Peter Scholtes was a Catholic priest at St. Brendan's parish in the South Side of Chicago. It was two years after the Civil Rights Act was passed and one year after the Voting Rights Act. Jim Crow was finally coming to an end. Many had high hopes that a new day of racial equality and shalom for all was dawning.

A series of interracial and interdenominational youth events had been planned on the South Side and Scholtes was directing a youth choir as part of these events. Unable to find a suitable song to capture the spirit, he wrote his own. It goes like this:

We are one in the Spirit, we are one in the Lord;
We are one in the Spirit, we are one in the Lord;
And we pray that all unity will one day be restored.

Chorus: And they'll know we are Christians by our love, by our love,
yes, they'll know we are Christians by our love.

We will walk with each other, we will walk hand in hand;
We will walk with each other, we will walk hand in hand;
And together we'll spread the news that God is in our land.

We Will work with each other, we will work side by side;
We will work with each other, we will work side by side;
And we'll guard each man's dignity and save each man's pride.

All praise to the Father, from whom all things come;
And all praise to Christ Jesus, His only Son.
And all praise to the Spirit who makes us one.

And they'll know we are Christians by our love.

How many of you sang that growing up? It became part of the Catholic folk mass, but it spread to the Lutherans and beyond and we sang it in the church I grew up in.

According to one source, at one point it became the sort of unofficial anthem of the Jesus Movement, the Jesus hippies of the late 60's and early 70's.

It was of course inspired by Jesus' words on his last night on earth – by this they will know you are my disciples...that you love one another.

So that's what it means to be a Christian...to be a disciple of Jesus. To love. To be loved. To be loved by Jesus. To be loved by one another. And to spread that love.

But here's something else about this story. Jesus alludes to it in what we read – he said not all of you are clean, because he knew who was going to betray him. Shortly after the foot washing and sharing bread together, Judas went out into the dark night to betray Jesus.

Jesus also knows that when things heat up, Peter will deny even knowing him. We'll talk more about that next week.

But even knowing those things, Jesus doesn't banish even Judas. He washed the feet of Judas the same as everyone else.

Foot washing seems a little weird to us.

But it was a common practice in Jesus' day. After a dusty or even muddy walk in sandals to share a meal with friends, feet could be pretty dirty. Typically a household servant would do the washing.

As Peter's reaction shows, to have their teacher, Jesus do it – in the middle of the meal – is appalling. It completely upends the normal order of things.

John doesn't necessarily call what Jesus did a sign. But it is nonetheless. It points to something about Jesus...that Jesus is a servant. And as he laid down his robe to wash feet, within 24 hours he will have laid down his life to save the world...to save us.

Then, that sign points right back to us. I have set you an example – as I have done to you...as I have humbly served you, so you should serve one another.

And that example doesn't just apply to our inner circle. We will remember that Jesus' love extended to a village in Samaria where most of the Jewish people wouldn't even have gone. The world will know we are Christians by our love.

Do they?

I fear that they don't.

In one of the commentaries I use, Jaime Clark Soles wrote, John's gospel is obsessed with love. Are we? That question has stuck with me all week.

Jesus shows us what love looks like. It may not always be obvious what love specifically should look like when we're talking about our own complex world. But I could pretty rapidly name several things that are not what love looks like.

But whatever situation we're talking about, in some way or another love will look like humble service. It will look like not destroying the one who seeks to do you harm. Jesus didn't stop Judas. He didn't send his other disciples after Judas to seize him.

He knew what it looked like to love the world, even though the world so often rebels against God and him. That kind of love meant not stopping what Judas was going to set in motion. It meant putting salvation of the world ahead of his own life. It meant loving Judas.

I would invite you as we continue through this Lent journey to reflect on what it means to love one another. What does it mean to love disciples who don't look or act like us? What does it look like to love non-Christians? What does it look like to love people who've done bad things?

I go back to the question, what does it mean to be a Christian? We can pretty confidently say it means to love Jesus. But to be a disciple of Jesus...to follow Jesus...means to also love Judas.

I can tell you not everyone is thinking too highly of Christians right now. They're not seeing the love.

But we can change that by following what Jesus commanded...and by singing with those Civil Rights pioneers from the South Side of Chicago who prayed that all unity would one day be restored.

And that the world would know we are Christians by our love.