

SERMON for Sunday, May 6, 2007
John 13: 31-35, Revelation 21:1-6

Rev. Shirley R. Funk
Lake Edge Lutheran Church
Madison, Wisconsin

Who Are We?

Who are we? That's a good question to ask this morning, as your pastors and lay delegates have just spent three days at the Marriott West Convention Center, at the Assembly of the South-Central Synod of Wisconsin of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, a gathering of 149 congregations. About 450 people met, ate, went to workshops, browsed the book table, picked up brochures and free pencils, magnets, and candy at displays. The people were of all shapes and sizes, men and women, old and young, dressed in suits and sandals and sweaters and t-shirts, some had lots of hair and some had none. To the other guests at the hotel, to the waitstaff who served our meals and other hotel employees, to the many who work and shop and dine in that particular business park area of Middleton, we looked no different from any other conventioners. We could have been at the home remodeling show or the annual gathering of librarians or music teachers or the insurance executives. With slight variations, we look no different. So what sets us apart, we who identify ourselves as faithful Christians, the called-out ones, the people of the way, the water, the cross? A simple answer, in today's gospel lesson, *By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.*

Of course, our love doesn't always show on the outside. And our love can look like humanitarian aid and charity given by secular groups with no faith connection – serving meals, offering shelter, collecting clothes, building houses. In fact, some would criticize the church for that very thing, *You look like nothing more than yet another do-gooder group!* So what sets us apart? Ours is a different kind of love.

Theologians Laura Smit and Scott Hoezee explain love this way: *when people talk about the characteristics of God, we think that it's enough to understand what we're talking about if we take a human concept like goodness and, when applying it to God, just make it bigger. WE are good but God is GOOOOOOOD....The kind of love Jesus wants us to display to the world is not just a souped-up version of human love but a love that is of a different kind, of a different quality, altogether.* It is not simply human love made large. It is Christ love, the love that comes from Christ who laid down his life for his friends, who put himself on the path of public trial and death, whose love sacrificed life itself. We can't duplicate it, we cannot be the same. We can only imitate, we only reflect the image, we only let the incredible and unending and non-judgmental, grace-filled love of God flow through us, until, in a way we can't regulate or control, in a way we cannot even sometimes see, in a way we cannot predict, in a way we cannot always choose. So when Jesus tells the disciples, *I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another,* what are some of the marks of that love? We get an idea from two phrases in our reading from the book of Revelation for this morning, held in front of us, in poetic imagery, the vision of a new heaven and a new earth, when all creation is restored, when the kingdom of God is made manifest, *on earth as it is in heaven.*

See, I am making all things new... Our three days at the Synod Assembly were filled with a lot of the usual, with displays of books from Madison Church Supply, with the Board of Pensions advising pastors on financial matters, with posters and people

from Lutheran camps and campuses, with the busy and oft-visited coffee pots. Predictable, same old stuff. Oh, there were some twists. We sat at long tables in the main meeting room, rather than at round ones. We got on yellow school busses to shuttle downtown to Luther Memorial for the opening worship. We had an opening night reception in the main hotel atrium rather than among the displays in the exhibition hall – pretty high class for a Lutheran gathering. We struggled with passing a flat budget and lamented the need to make cuts, we passed resolutions dealing with issues of social justice and proclamation of the gospel. We engaged in Bible study and worship. So what was new? The sanctuary of Luther Memorial reminded us that we are a church with a magnificent history, rich liturgy and music, grounded in the ancient texts of Scripture, our roots in a Biblical people. At the Friday evening banquet we celebrated church anniversaries – 150, 100, 50 years of faithful witness and celebrated ordination anniversaries of pastors – 60, 50, 25 years of faithful service. So we have this old thing going. But we welcomed new pastors into our midst, we learned that we have the highest number of candidates for ordination – preparing for and attending seminary, than ever before, we are awakening to the possibilities of new mission fellowships and congregations, especially among Latino peoples in our communities, we sing old songs in new ways, we take an occasional risk to be a prophetic voice. Amid the ho-hums, the occasional yawns, and the muttering, *I think I'll go out and get another cup of coffee*, there was now and again a stirring, a movement, a glimpse of a new and renewing thing. And we are a part of this body of Christ that loves in new ways as the Spirit works in us.

And also from that vision in Revelation, *To the thirsty I will give water as a gift from the spring of the water of life*. Did you know that 1.1 billion people worldwide lack access to clean, safe water, and more than 2.1 million people each year, most of them children, die from waterborne diseases? In the Malawi village of Maziyaya, the women, like many women everywhere in developing countries, were in charge of getting the water for their families. They walked to the river, and considered themselves fortunate that it was only one mile, one way, and downhill at that. The river was a dangerous place in which to be wading and filling their containers, infested as it was with bacteria and crocodiles. The return trip, that same mile, was uphill, with heavy, heavy jars of water, with sick and malnourished children to encourage and to carry. Once back in their village, they set out again, to forage for firewood in order to boil the water and make it safe to drink. This particular village is now a different place, a new and better place to live with a well at its center, a well where the women and children can pump clean water. The impetus for this water, quite literally, of life, in this and many places? Churches working together through Church World Service, a cooperative ministry of 35 Protestant, Orthodox and Anglican denominations, providing sustainable self-help and development, disaster relief, and refugee assistance in some 80 countries, gathering together government people and resources, working with the United Nations, working with villagers to advocate for themselves and their neighbor for change. A beautiful hand pump in the center of town! This truly is water for life.

By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another. Can you see it? I can. I can see that love in people who are separated by difference of opinion, people who have hurt one another with the sting of prejudice and closed doors, people who have fought and refuse to speak have forgiven and have reconciled, who have shared peace and come to the table together. I can see that love in a congregation willing to share concerns and cares honestly and openly, willing to be vulnerable with each other when most vulnerable and tender, when carrying burdens too heavy to carry alone. I can see that love when people of God

advocate without ceasing for peace. I can see not simply a feel good love but the love of Christ that comes from opening our minds to new ideas, new perspectives, new expressions of gospel truth, that comes from opening our ears to hearing new voices of those not yet heard, that comes from opening our hearts to loving each other no matter what.

In the book that we use with our young members to prepare for first communion, theologian Dan Erlander reminds us that Jesus was criticized and crucified by the sticklers for the law even when the law hurt and excluded, by the narrow minds, the ones whose could only give when it was to their own advantage, that Jesus died at the hands of whom Erlander describes as *the crabby people*. But the real story is not over, because Jesus invites everyone to the great feast of love, even *the crabby people*. And there the love of Christ changes us, fills us, and all things are made new. *And they'll know we are Christians by our love...*

Amen.