

Sunday, April 28, 2013: John 13:31-35

by [Robert Rimbo](#) in the [April 17, 2013](#) issue

The people in an Ohio county were angry with the area's red foxes because they had eaten some of the people's domestic chickens and many of the wild quail. So 600 men, women and children formed a circle five miles across, walked through the woods and frightened the foxes out into the open by shouting. Inside of a shrinking circle the foxes ran about in panic, exhausting themselves. One fox would stop to snarl; another would try to lick the hand of its attacker. None were spared. Killing became a sport, and all of the foxes were clubbed to death. As the circle closed, the remaining foxes, not knowing what else to do, lay down to die.

There is no shortage of circles of destruction and death. But suddenly, into this culture of death, came an announcement: "I give you a new commandment, that you love one another."

Today's reading tells us where the Christian begins and ends and where the church finds its purpose: not with condemnation but with love. It's a commandment. It's a gift. And it's new.

It may strike us as strange that love can be commanded. But my Lutheran understanding of the law-gospel dialectic reminds me that we Christians have a covenant with Christ that is sealed with his blood. If we are to live as a chosen people, there are certain stipulations we have to observe, certain obligations that we must fulfill. From the Ten Commandments, for example, that we know what we are forbidden to do if we want to be in covenant, if we are to be faithful to God. Don't worship false gods, don't skip church, don't take another's life, don't play fast and loose with sex, don't take what doesn't belong to you, don't speak ill of another, don't lust. Don't.

But the don'ts are not at the center of Christianity. It's what every don't points to that's key, and every don't points to an activity that is the other side of Christianity's most precious coin; either the activity is a threat to love, or it is the reverse of love or a refusal of love. Often the don't activity brings love out of the clouds, puts flesh and blood on the skeleton and brings love alive. We see this refusal to love

throughout the Gospels: the priest who sees the half-dead victim and ignores him; Judas selling Jesus for 30 pieces of silver; Peter denying that he knows Jesus; Herod beheading John the Baptist to please a dancing girl; the Sadducees trying to catch Jesus in a contradiction; the scribes and Pharisees who neglect justice and mercy. What makes these actions sins is ultimately that they are refusals to love.

The key to understanding this love is understanding the motivation. It is not something we have to do, but something we get to do. It is a gift. You don't acquire it by human effort, by wanting it, by being the best you can be through your own efforts. It comes from God through Jesus to those who believe in him. Its source is Jesus; you can have such love only because Jesus loves you, only because his love was so all-embracing that he laid down his life for you, gave his life to you and to me.

But how is this command new? After all, the people of Israel were commanded to love their neighbors and even the alien dwelling among them (Lev. 19:18, 34). It's new because it's part of the new covenant, the basic, fundamental relationship between Christ and his sisters and brothers. So intimate is this love, so striking, that in Jesus' mind it should command the world's attention. "By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another." Everyone.

God and humans, the partners in this new covenant, are not separated by radical inequality. Rather, God has become our brother in Jesus Christ, and the love we have for Jesus is the love we now share with our sisters and brothers.

This love gives me hope. I often see it in action—in the response of countless people to the storm-ravaging destruction of Hurricane Sandy; in congregational ministries to battered, abused women and girls; in the efforts to address gun violence.

We are learning to love, and that gives reason for hope. Each of us in the body of Christ has so much pent-up love struggling and yearning to burst forth. And time is desperately short. We sense it all around us: poverty in the richest country in the world, violent deaths, racism. We dare not do nothing while we wait for the day when all creation will be freed from imperfection, when God will wipe every tear from the eyes of everyone.

We follow Jesus, the Lord of life, the source of forgiveness and the fountain of hope. We have promised to follow him and be guided by him. By his love we will be able to remove those circles of destruction and death.