

An inheritance of love (John 13:31-35)

People sometimes regress to childlike behavior in stressful situations.

by [Sarah S. Scherschligt](#)

May 13, 2022

To receive these posts by email each Monday, [sign up](#).

For more commentary on this week's readings, see the [Reflections on the Lectionary](#) page. For full-text access to all articles, [subscribe](#) to the Century.

“Can you help me? I don’t know what to do.”

The *New York Times* reported that these words were spoken from one Ukrainian neighbor to another, less than 24 hours into the Russian invasion, as residents of Kyiv scrambled to make sense of what was happening.

The profound disorientation is heartbreakingly understandable. It’s also familiar. Similar words are spoken anytime the world seems to be collapsing around you. It was a refrain throughout the pandemic each time it became impossible to predict the future.

“I don’t know what to do” could also be spoken by the disciples to Jesus, when he sits them down together on that last night. The die has been cast. Judas has left to do his Judas-y thing. The group of faithful is even smaller and more insecure. Jesus’ ministry has shown the disciples what strange, good things happen when God inhabits human form. They have come to believe he is not just any other man but God’s very son. Glory!

And next he will be...handed over to be killed? Impossible. Having left everything to follow him, it’s easy to imagine that they do not know what to do without him. Glory?

Psychology tells us people sometimes regress to childlike behavior in stressful situations. Here, the full-grown, hand-picked students of the brilliant rabbi Jesus are addressed by their savior as “little children.” Soon Jesus will use the language of orphaning. These are terms of endearment and belonging. They reveal just how vulnerable and ill-equipped the disciples are for life without Jesus.

But they do more than that. They are terms of inheritance. Jesus is the inheritor of God, *as of a father's only son*. Now Jesus is passing to the disciples what he has received.

Jesus' farewell speech is his last chance to give them what they need to know to glorify God without him. Faced with an uncertain future and the grief of one who will not be there to lead the way, they are given just one commandment: love one another.

Commandment means something specific here. The original commandments were given to the community of God's people in the wilderness, in order that they would get through an unfamiliar and frightening place together. This is how we make it. This is what we do.

The new commandment given to the disciples anticipates their disorientation and gives them the key to re-orienting in life after Jesus' death: love each other.

Love is not just for their own good, though it certainly will help them through the tough times ahead. They love one another as an act of witness, so people will know that Jesus lives on. Their love becomes God's glory. The glory of God which landed so unexpectedly in the flesh and blood of their mortal friend would continue its weighty presence on the earth through them. This is as much of a miracle as anything.

In this Easter season, the good news of Jesus' resurrection changes everything—and yet, *he is not here*. This commandment of love—given to the disciples before his death and communicated to us after his resurrection—comes to us as the commandment that can help us through our profound disorientation. Love is more than our command. It is our inheritance.