

# A New Commandment

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*Text: John 13:31-35*

The Portokalos family from *My Big Fat Greek Wedding* is loud. They are in your face. In this Greek family depicted in the semi-autobiographical film written by Nia Vardolos, the father thinks Windex is an all-purpose skin care product. Aunt Voula regales strangers with a story about her surgery to remove a lump that turned out to be a teratoma, with hair and teeth. There are clear expectations of loyalty and fidelity to parents. There's an overweening concern for the choices and life direction of younger members of the family. But for the noise and stifling closeness and odd personality quirks, there is genuine care and love that spans generations. One reason the film was so wildly successful is that it spoke to the experience of so many people from large extended families in traditional cultures. I think many of us can relate to the experience of living within a family that is nurturing and zany and maddening and lifegiving all at once.

One of the threads running through the film, though, is the strong sense of identity the family has, especially Gus, the father. He claims he can trace the etymology of any word back to Greek, and he tells his daughter, "There are two kinds of people - Greeks, and everyone else who wish they was Greek." To be Greek, according to Gus, means being proud of who you are, and expressive and open about your feelings. It means belonging to the Greek Orthodox Church. It means being rooted in your family and fulfilling your obligations. Gus finds fault with his daughter Toula's fiance, the WASP-y Ian, because, according to Gus, Ian and his family are so reserved, so unexpressive, so "dry... like toast." He doesn't see any way they can possibly fit in with the Portokalos clan. Identity — who you are — is inextricably bound up with behavior — what you do, how you act. You can tell who someone is, and whether they belong, by the way they behave. The whole sweep of the story told by the movie is about how we can open our hearts and imaginations to build bridges across different identities, but Gus's point stands in the end. His daughter marries the non-Greek guy, but they move in next door to her parents, and they send their own kid to Greek school, even as they tell her, "You can marry whoever you want!" You come to belong, you become part of the family by taking on the family's practices and values as your own, though there's some room for negotiation. But our identity — who we are — is established, rooted, and recognized in what we do.

Today Jesus talks to us about what it means to be one of his disciples, to take this on as an identity. This conversation is happening at a time that is fraught and dangerous. He is sitting with his closest friends after the last supper in Jerusalem, on the night when he is to be arrested. We're told that Jesus, having loved these dear ones who belonged to him, loved them "to the end" — not just to the end of his life, but to the fullest possible extent. He sets them an example, kneeling down and washing their feet — all of their feet, even those of Judas, who is about to betray him. And then, once Judas has left to do what he has chosen to do, Jesus gives them a new commandment, one that

is going to be the basis of their identity as disciples.

Commandments—the “shalts” and “shalt nots” intended to guide proper behavior—were nothing new to these faithful Jewish men. They had been raised from childhood to understand that God had given commandments to their ancestors, saying, “You shall be holy to me; for I the LORD am holy, and I have separated you from the other peoples to be mine” (Leviticus 20:26). The Jewish people held fast tenaciously to their identity as a holy people through exile and oppression, keeping the commandments and refusing to worship idols or profane the sabbath or eat the foods that the commandments walled off as unclean. By keeping the commandments, they were able to keep alive the memory of who they were, a distinct and special people set apart by God. Behavior—living a unique way of life—is how the Jewish people recognized one another and signaled their identity to the world. So the idea that a commandment could serve as a badge, a marker of identity, was not new to the disciples. It was central to their understanding of what it meant to be Jewish.

Jesus’s new commandment is this: “love one another, just as I have loved you.” But here we have to be careful, because “love one another” by itself is not a new commandment. “Love your neighbor as yourself” comes right from the Torah, in Leviticus 19:18. This is an *old* commandment—a good and true and lifegiving commandment, but an old one. If Jesus meant to give his disciples a distinctive identity with a new commandment, if he is giving them a commandment by which others are going to recognize them as special and set apart, that new commandment couldn’t be simply, “love one another.” No, the important part, the part that’s new, the part that’s distinctive and different, is this: “just as I have loved you.”

“Love one another, just as I have loved you.” There are a few lessons we take from this. The first lesson is that the love the disciple community is meant to cultivate and nurture and exhibit comes from Jesus’ example. And man, is that a hard example to follow! On the very night Jesus spoke these words, he hosted at his own table and broke bread with a man he knew was going to send him to his death. And he not only fed that man, Judas, not only welcomed him to his table—he got down and washed Judas’s feet with the rest. Love that continues to set a place for the enemy, the betrayer, is the kind of love Jesus came to offer to us, and it’s the kind of love he invites us to take up for ourselves. We’re meant to show kindness in visible, tangible ways toward those who hate us and mean us harm. We’re not meant to take away their freedom to make their own choices, or chase after them into the streets when they choose to leave. They don’t get to sideline us from the task God has set before us. But they are always welcome at our table. Jesus loved his enemies—loved them not in some theoretical way, or simply in his mind, but concretely, by offering them hospitality and welcome.

As we’ve seen among our friends in the United Methodist Church this year, with their controversies over the place of LGBTQ people in the church, and as we’ve experienced in our own denomination, the church is often the place where there are fierce arguments about what God’s love means for who we welcome into the church and who gets to serve in leadership. When we have these kinds of disagreements, the kind of love we see in Jesus leads us not to abandon what we believe about the good news or how to live it out, but surely to love those on the other side. It means we pray for them, we take advantage of opportunities for fellowship with them, and we otherwise look for chances to be gracious and generous, whenever we can.

But the second lesson is that Jesus is commanding us to share only what we have already received. “Love one another *as I have* loved you,” he says. His new commandment presumes that we have already experienced Jesus’ grace and mercy. Through the years, the church has looked to perpetuate itself by teaching stories and

theology, through catechisms, through Sunday school, through preaching. But what Jesus is saying here is that our identity as Christians depends not so much on being *taught*—though that's important—but on being *loved*. In a few weeks our confirmation class will come before the church to share their statements of faith, and the content they're getting as part of confirmation is worth learning, but maybe more important is the relationship they enter into with a mentor. Having done this myself a couple of years ago, I can tell you it makes a difference not just to learn about prayer, but to make a commitment to pray with and for someone every day, to hear about what they're struggling with and what they hope for. And our hope is that in that experience of being listened to and affirmed and prayed for, these young men and women catch a glimpse of the love and affirmation God has for them. You can't share the kind of love you've never received, and so the church exists to create relationships like these, where people can experience God's love, in order to share it with others.

Jesus loved his own to the end, to the fullest extent possible. He loved them, loved us, even when we weren't at all lovable, even when one of us, when some of us meant to do him harm. He loved by putting himself at our feet, by washing, by serving, by setting aside the dignity and distance he was entitled to, not only as teacher, but as Messiah and Lord. He loved his own to the end, and he set us an example of a love that has the power to change us, to change our communities, to change even our enemies. Jesus dares to give us this new commandment because he has already rooted us in the fertile soil of his deep love for us. Jesus loved, he loves, to the end—and through his grace, we are called to love in the same way. Thanks be to God for this love that embraces, transforms, and equips us to be disciples of Jesus. Amen.