

**Sermon preached by Dr. Neil Smith at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church,
Kingstowne, Virginia, on Sunday, May 12, 2019**

**ESSENTIALS OF OUR FAITH:
THE CHURCH (2)**

John 13:31-35

I did not plan a Mother's Day message for today. I do want to tell you, though, that Salary.com has just released the results of its 2019 Mom Salary Survey. They calculate the value of a mother's work by tracking real-time market prices for the many jobs mothers perform. According to their survey, the median annual salary for stay-at-home moms in 2019 is – are you ready for this? - \$178,201, which is an increase of 9.6%, or more than \$15,000, over their 2018 mother's worth calculation (\$162,582). "Parents," they say, "hold the ultimate hybrid job at home. The role of Mom requires a diverse skill set that commands serious market value in the talent market, and with new demands on Mom's time arising every day, we only expect their market value to increase in the future. The immense dedication and work ethic of modern moms does not go unnoticed or unappreciated, and we were not at all surprised at the increased salary we calculated this year, nor do we expect this pace of growth to slow over the next five years" (Quoted in Connor Harrison, "How Much Is a Mother Really Worth?" www.Salary.com, May 10, 2019).

Whether we are talking about stay-at-home moms or moms who work outside the home, moms with children at home or moms whose kids are all grown, the church is one place where mothers who invest their lives in the well-being of their children and families should never go unnoticed or unappreciated. So, Moms, we salute you. May we all make it our aim to keep the fifth commandment, to honor our fathers and our mothers, as long as we live (Exodus 20:12; Deuteronomy 5:16).

* * * * *

What I really want to talk about today is the church and its distinctive characteristics. To give biblical focus to our thinking about the church, please turn to John 13:31-35 in your Bible. You will also find these verses printed in your bulletin this morning. Let's give our full and reverent attention to the reading of God's holy Word.

* * * * *

Growing up in the small town of Britton, South Dakota, Lee Eclov experienced more than his share of brutal winter weather. During the harshest months, the temperature there drops below zero (and stays there for some time). The greater danger, though, comes from blizzards, which, among other things, cause the country roads to become snowbound and impassable. Years ago, the local school district came up with a creative way for keeping kids safe when a blizzard hit on a school day. Normally, students would take one of the eight school buses home. But occasionally a blizzard would come during the school day and it wasn't safe to bus the kids home. So the school district devised a system in which every student who lived on a farm outside of town was paired with a family in town that would take them in, in the event of a winter storm. The students' parents would know they were safe and being cared for by another family in town.

When Eclov visited his hometown a few years ago, he connected with someone who told him that the Eclov home in town had been his “storm home.” It had been his refuge when a blizzard or other winter storm prevented the school bus from taking him home.

Do you see where this is going?

“Every church,” say Eclov, “is supposed to be a storm home. By the grace of God, (the) church should be a safe place, a home that some people have never had” (Lee Eclov, www.preachingtoday.com).

A “storm home” is what the church should be, a place of refuge, protection, support, love, and encouragement when you are going through a stormy or painful season in your life. A “storm home” is not the only way, but it is a good way to describe what God intends the church to be and how it is meant to function. Not only in the lives of its members but in the life of the surrounding community as well.

Serving as a “storm home” for one another *and* for people outside the church is one way we carry out the *mandatum novum*, the new commandment Jesus gave His disciples in the Upper Room on the night before His crucifixion (John 13:34).

FOUR MARKS OF A TRUE CHURCH

The Affirmation of Faith we said together this morning from the EPC *Essentials of Our Faith* identifies four distinguishing marks of a true church. It says: The Church finds her visible yet imperfect expression ... Which is to say, there is no such thing here on earth as a “perfect church.” I have often said that Faith will never be a perfect church as long as I’m the pastor, because you can’t have a perfect church with an imperfect pastor. Charles Spurgeon and others have pointed out that the moment any of us joins what we think is a perfect church, or *the* perfect church, it becomes imperfect by virtue of our connection with it.

The Church finds her visible yet imperfect expression in local congregations (like ours) where 1) the Word of God is preached in its purity and 2) the sacraments are administered in their integrity; 3) where scriptural discipline is practiced; and 4) where loving fellowship is maintained. For her perfecting (the Church) awaits the return of her Lord.

If you should ever move away and no longer be able to be an active participant in the worship, life, and witness of Faith Church, when you move to a new community, you should look for a church fellowship that exhibits these four distinguishing marks.

No preacher and no congregation get God’s Word totally right all the time. If you’re looking for the preacher or church that understands and teaches God’s Word perfectly without fail, sooner or later you will be disappointed. The church you’re looking for doesn’t exist. I am a fallible preacher, and we are a fallible church – a church full of fallible people – proclaiming and teaching the *infallible* Word fallibly. What is important is that we take God and His

Word seriously. We recognize and willingly submit to the authority of the Bible as the final and only infallible rule and guide for what we are to believe and how we are to live. We desire to be faithful to God and His Word in all things. Some things are absolutely essential, and it is imperative that we be in agreement on these things. Other things are what we call non-essential. They are matters of personal preference or tradition in which God's Word gives us freedom to differ with one another. The bottom line, though, is that we acknowledge and graciously submit to God's authority over our lives and the church as reflected in the teachings of the Bible.

Second, we seek to administer the sacraments (baptism and the Lord's Supper, or communion) in ways that properly honor God and make the gospel of His grace visible. St. Augustine famously defined a sacrament as "a visible sign of an invisible grace." The sacraments, then, are signs of God's grace, which comes free of charge to people who don't deserve it and never will. Baptism, whether administered to the child of believing parents or to a believer professing a personal faith in Christ, is a *sign* of God's saving grace. It is not proof of grace. It does not confer God's grace. It is not necessary for salvation. Nor does it guarantee salvation. It points us to our need for God's grace and to the wonder of that grace freely given to us – to all – who believe in Jesus Christ.

In communion, the visible signs of the bread and cup are to remind us of the body and blood of Jesus given for us. The bread and cup do not literally become the body and blood of Jesus. They remind us of the once-for-all sacrifice of Jesus on the cross to save us from our sins. We are not saved by our participation in the sacrament of communion. We are saved by the death of Jesus on our behalf – the ultimate gift of grace – the benefits of which we receive by faith in Him.

Some churches, following the practice of the Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox churches, celebrate the Lord's Supper on a weekly basis. Other churches, including ours, influenced by the Protestant Reformation, celebrate the Lord's Supper less frequently. In our case, we usually have communion on the first Sunday of each month, as well as on Thursday of Holy Week, when we commemorate Jesus' last supper with His disciples. Whenever we do it, we do it, as Jesus instructed, "in remembrance of (Him)" and His saving death for us.

The third distinguishing mark of a true church is the exercise of church discipline in accord with the Scriptures. To protect and promote the peace, unity, and purity of the church against doctrinal error (heresy), immoral conduct, and willful contempt against the church or its leaders, it is necessary for the church to exercise loving discipline in the life of the fellowship. The purpose of church discipline, as it says in our *Book of Order*, is to honor God (to keep God's name from coming into disrepute), to correct and restore sinners, to protect the church from error, and to remove sinful conduct from the church (See EPC Book of Discipline, Chapter 1: "Discipline – Its Nature, Subjects, and Purpose"). Carrying out church discipline is not pleasant, but it is meant to be redemptive and restorative. It is not meant to be vindictive or punitive. It is a necessary responsibility of the elders of the church as they provide spiritual oversight in the life of the church and its members. It is necessary because we take sin seriously. The church is not a place where "anything goes." It is necessary, too, because we take the truth seriously and do not want anyone to be led astray by false teaching.

John Calvin and other Reformers affirmed all three of these – the preaching of God’s Word, the administration of sacraments, and the exercise of church discipline in accord with the Scriptures – as distinguishing marks of a true church. But these three marks do not go far enough.

The founders of the EPC recognized the validity of these three distinguishing marks. It is true: In order to have a true church that is blessed by God and honoring to Him, you have to have the faithful preaching of the Word, the correct administration of the sacraments, and the proper exercise of church discipline. There is no substitute for the preaching and teaching of God’s Word. There is no excuse for willfully neglecting the sacraments. Nor is there any excuse for turning a blind eye to persistent sin or doctrinal error that threatens the peace, unity, and purity of the church. But you can have all these things and still be lacking what Jesus says is the ultimate distinguishing mark of the church – *love. Jesus’ kind of love.* This is what the *Essentials of Our Faith* is getting at when it speaks of the presence of “loving fellowship” as a distinguishing mark of the church.

What does Jesus say? Look at John 13:34-35. In verse 34 He says: “A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another.” This is not simply a command to show love to one another. It is about the kind of love we are to have for one another. It is about what our love for each other – and for spiritually lost people all around us – is to look like. This is what makes the “new command” really new: “As I have loved you, so you must love one another.” Our love for each other – and for the world – is to be like the self-giving, sacrificial love of Jesus for us. Jesus, as it says in *The Message* paraphrase of Ephesians 5:2, “didn’t love in order to get something from us but to give everything of Himself to us. Love like that.” *Love like that. Love like Jesus.*

Then, in verse 35: “This is how everyone will recognize that you are my disciples – when they see the love you have for each other” (*MSG*). I think Jesus also means; “When they see the love you have for the world around you – a world I love so much that I came to give my life for it” (cf. John 3:16).

THE MARK OF THE CHRISTIAN

When I was a teenager, Francis Schaeffer wrote an influential little book called *The Mark of the Christian*. In it he said that Jesus has given the world outside the church the right and prerogative to judge the church – to judge the genuineness of our claims to be followers of Jesus – by the way we love one another in the church (or, conversely, by our lack of observable love for one another) and, by extension, by the love (or lack of love) we show to our neighbors, friends and family members; to the people we work with, go to school with, play on sports teams with, or make music with in band, orchestra, or choir.

The essential mark of a Christian is not a license plate or bumper sticker that broadcasts your faith. It is not a fish symbol or a cross necklace or a bracelet you can use to witness to your faith. All of these can be good. The cross has been *the* defining symbol of the Christian faith for 2,000 years, pointing to Jesus, who bore our sins in His body on the cross (1 Peter 2:24). The fish was a symbol of the faith for the early Christian church, because the Greek word for

fish – *ichthus* – is an acronym for *Iesous Christos Theou Uios Soter* – which means “Jesus Christ, Son of God, Savior.” It was an underground way for followers of Jesus to identify one another at a time when it was dangerous to openly profess faith in Jesus.

The point Francis Schaeffer made, though, is that love is “the mark Jesus gives to label a Christian not just in one era or in one locality but at all times and all places until Jesus returns” (Schaeffer, *The Church at the End of the 20th Century*, 133).

Simply put, our love for one another – the way we treat and care for one another – is to be a witness to the world. In fact, according to Jesus, it is our primary witness to the world. Jesus says that people outside the church have the right to judge the authenticity of our faith on the basis of how we treat each other. And, I think, on the basis of how we treat people who don’t share our faith as well.

So, the question becomes: When outsiders look at the church, what do they see? What do they see when they look at our church? What do they see when they look at your life and relationships? Or mine? What do they see when they look at the conduct, the actions, the lives of church people who profess to be followers of Jesus?

I cringe sometimes – I want to weep sometimes – when I see what some people who profess to be Christians do, or hear what they say and how they say it. I know I’m not without fault myself. I fail daily to live up to my calling as a follower of Jesus. Which is why I’m so grateful that God is so gracious and merciful, so slow to anger and abounding in love.

What I’m trying to say is that if love is the distinguishing mark of a Christian, then it must be the distinguishing mark of our lives. It must be the distinguishing mark of our life together in the church. It must be the distinguishing mark of the way we relate to the community in which God has placed us. And we must be intentional about it. Too often, I’m afraid, what the world sees when it looks at the church or the lives of professing Christians is not love. Not the kind of love Jesus modeled for us. Fair or not, too often what the world sees when it looks at the church is not love but judgment. Condemnation. Or self-righteousness, as if we’re better than everyone else.

THE MOST LOVING PLACE IN TOWN

The church, as Ken Blanchard and Phil Hodges have written, is to be “the most loving place in town” (Blanchard and Hodges, *The Most Loving Place in Town*). Wouldn’t it be great if people in Kingstowne were to see and say that Faith Church is the most loving place in town?

Everybody needs to be loved. Everybody needs to know that they are loved. And, as the Bible says, “God *is* love” (1 John 4:16). “This is love: Not that we loved God, but that He loved us and sent His Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins” (1 John 4:10). There is no love that compares with the love Jesus demonstrated for us. But in the church – and in the lives of ordinary believers like us – the extraordinary love of Jesus is to be on display and woven into the fabric of our lives.

I long for the day when our neighbors, our community, and our culture as a whole will see and recognize the love of Jesus as the defining mark of our lives and of the church as a whole.

There is an Italian expression for love that goes like this: *ti voglio bene*. (Pardon my accent.) It is often translated as “I love you.” But its more literal meaning is “I wish you good” or “I want what is good for you.” That is what love is. That is what love does. That is what the love of Jesus is like. To love one another as Jesus loves us is to take our eyes off ourselves, to focus on what is in the best interest of another and to act accordingly. (Adapted from Edward Sri, *Men, Women, and the Mystery of Love*, 55).

Jesus says to us all: “*Ti voglio bene*.” And then He says to His church, to all of us who profess to be His followers: “Go and do likewise. As I have loved you, so you must love one another.” To fail the test of love is to compromise our witness. Fatally.

The church is to be the most loving place in town. May it be so in us. May our church family be known as the most loving place in Kingstowne.

The church is to be the most forgiving place in town. Because everybody needs forgiveness. And everybody needs to learn to forgive. If we don’t, or won’t, we shut ourselves off from the flow of God’s mercy and grace in our lives. May our church be the most forgiving place in town.

The church is to be the most grace-filled place in town. Because everybody needs grace. May our church always be a place of grace, a place where God’s grace abounds.

The church should be a storm home for all of us who need a place of refuge. May our church be a storm home when the storms of life hit.

LOVE RADIUS

Here is a final thought. Bombs and other explosive devices have what is called a “blast radius,” which is the distance from the source that will be affected when an explosion occurs. The United States military’s largest conventional (non-nuclear) bomb, the MOAB – Massive Ordnance Air Blast Bomb, also known as the “Mother of All Bombs” – has a blast radius of one mile in every direction.

In a different kind of way, the church ought to have a “love radius,” don’t you think? Our “love radius” should affect every person connected in any way to our church family. And it ought to extend out from the source, from our ministry center here at 5725 Castlewellan Drive, to positively affect our community one mile, two miles, even five miles or more in every direction. (The analogy and the term “love radius” come from Tyler Edwards, *Zombie Church*, 59).

How great would it be if that were true of us? Wouldn’t it bring joy to the heart of Jesus? What can we do – what can *you* do – to make it more real?

Jesus says: “A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. This is how people will know that you are my disciples, when they see how you love one another” (John 13:34-35). May this love always be the defining mark of your life and mine, and in the life of our church.

Lord, let it be so. Amen.