

WESTMINSTER
PRESBYTERIAN
CHURCH



SERMON

May 17, 2026

You Are What You Love

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Printed in the United States of America

First Printing: May 18, 2026

Invocation

Eternal God,

In the reading of the Scripture, may your Word be heard;

In the meditations of our hearts, may your Word be known;

And in the faithfulness of our lives, may your Word be shown.
AMEN.

Scripture Reading

New Revised Standard Version: Updated Edition — John 13:31–35

31 When he had gone out, Jesus said, “Now the Son of Man has been glorified, and God has been glorified in him. 32 If God has been glorified in him, God will also glorify him in himself and will glorify him at once. 33 Little children, I am with you only a little longer. You will look for me, and as I said to the Jews so now I say to you, ‘Where I am going, you cannot come.’ 34 I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. 35 By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.”

A few years back, Sarah and I got to go see Cirque du Soleil when they were in town. Of course, it was a ridiculously impressive performance — tumbling and spinning through the

air, people throwing other people around on stage, all wrapped up in the most beautiful and glorious choreography.

But because I'm me, I was whispering to Sarah almost every single act: "I could do that! I could do that! I could do that!" Yeah, she laughed too, I don't know what all that was about!

All of it got me thinking: how does someone learn to do the kind of acrobatics those performers pull off? That question combined with a little writer's block led me down a deep dive on YouTube, and while the Cirque performers are pretty reluctant to give away the bigger secrets of their craft, the one thing that almost everyone said helped them learn was that they had a mentor. They had someone who showed them how. They had someone who did it with them. They had someone who let them try it themselves. They had something to *imitate*.

And it turns out, that has a great deal to do with where we are in our text this morning.

This is a short little passage, but it is packed with nuance. Let's take a look at what's happening here.

The New Commandment

In the Torah — the first five books of the Hebrew Bible — there were lots of commandments. Some of us grew up thinking there were ten, and the Ten Commandments certainly get most of the airtime. But in reality there were 613 commandments in just those first five books alone. They covered everything from justice, morality, worship practices, and communal life in the nation of Israel. If you had to distill all 613 into a single sentence, you might say they were a collection of rules to help us live in right relationship with our God and with each other. Perhaps someone might even come

along and say the greatest commandment is to love God and to love your neighbor as yourself.

But we know how the story goes. We couldn't keep the 613 commandments. Who can keep count of all those rules?

One New Commandment

And so here in this text, Jesus decides to simplify things considerably. One commandment. Surely we can handle that, can't we?

There is a nuance in the Greek here that some translations miss, so we really need to pay careful attention:

*"I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. **Just** as I have loved you, you also should love one another." (John 13:34)*

The one commandment is to love one another. Simple enough, right? Except — we cannot simply throw any old version of love out there into the world and think we're living into this new commandment of Jesus. The key word in that verse is the word just. Just as I have loved you. Jesus is not only giving us a commandment; he is giving us a model.

But there are lots of bad examples of love out there. These are worth exploring.

Every now and again I come across someone who is behaving abjectly cruelly or demeaning toward someone else, and then turns around and says, "Oh come on. It's just a little tough love." I don't think that's really love at all. I don't see any examples in the Scriptures of Jesus using tough love, at least

not in that way. Love doesn't use the means of cruelty to achieve kingdom ends.

Or perhaps you have been guilty of a selfish kind of love? Have you ever done something really nice for someone — some deep act of loving kindness — because you knew they could give something back to you? Let your friend borrow your car because you know they have a lake house and you want in on that? Invited a friend to a Penguins game because you know they have Steelers tickets? Sent cookies to your kid's teacher, because you want the next grade to fall their way? None of that is confession by the way, just some examples! It should be obvious, but this is not love either. In fact, Jesus saw this one coming: "If you lend to those from whom you expect to receive payment, what credit is that to you? Even sinners lend to sinners, to receive as much again." (Luke 6:34)

Or maybe you've shown an act of love because it makes you look good — helping out with a mission project so people can see you, giving to the Salvation Army kettle because a lot of folks are staring and are likely to notice, leaving a big generous tip because you want the wait staff to think well of you. These acts themselves are fine! It's the heart behind them that gets us into trouble.

We are called to love not in any of these lesser ways, but just as Jesus loved his disciples. Like an acrobat and their mentor, we are called to imitate Jesus when it comes to how we love our brothers and sisters. So perhaps we ought to ask: what does that actually look like? What did Jesus just do in the verses right before this?

The Foot Washing

The text we read today follows what happens in John during the Passover meal, where we get our understanding of the communion celebration. But before they set about dinner, Jesus does something interesting.

Jesus Christ – the incarnate one among us, the Word of God made flesh – gets up from the table, takes off his outer robe, ties a towel around himself, and takes on the job of a servant. He begins to wash his disciples' feet.

There is something remarkable buried in the first line of the passage we read this morning: "When he had gone out, Jesus said..." The "he" in that sentence is Judas. When Judas had gone out. Which means Judas was there in the circle of disciples. Judas, whom Jesus knew was about to betray him, was seated around the table. Judas, who was going to wreck everything, received communion. Judas, who was going to hand the Son of Man over to death, had his feet washed by the Son of Man.

Tell me that's not beautiful! To love like Jesus might mean loving people who are on our enemies list. To love like Jesus might mean extending a hand to those who have done us wrong. To love like Jesus might mean offering forgiveness, even knowing the person is never going to learn.

So what is foot washing, exactly? Let me suggest three words.

First, it is humble. The God of the Universe in the flesh has decided it is not humble enough to have left all that Godly power and come down here. He is going to take on the form of a servant. Peter caught it right away. Jesus shouldn't be doing this. From Peter's perspective, foot washing is beneath Jesus.

Exactly. It is an act of intentional humility because it is what he wants us to emulate.

Second, it is awkward. A couple of times in ministry I have had the opportunity to offer a foot washing service, and it is always awkward. People are never sure how to take their socks off in the sanctuary. There is touching involved, which is unusual at best. There are feet involved, which are arguably some of the dirtiest parts of us since they are on the ground all day. It is strange, no question. But that has never, ever taken away the power of the practice. In fact, I have watched completely stunned as the line of people waiting to have their feet washed extends to the back of the room. It is awkward – and also somehow holy.

Third, it is a risk. Jesus is not only putting himself in a humble place; he is putting himself in a vulnerable place. He is risking the disciples' opinion of him. He is risking his own comfort – who knows what those guys have been walking in all day. He is risking time; surely there was a laundry list of more pressing activities for his last night on earth. But love, in the end, makes all of these risks worth it. He knows that this love he is sharing with his disciples is worth it.

So we are called to love just as Jesus loved – humbly, awkwardly, and at some risk. What does that look like for us? Let me offer three windows into it.

The Love We Are Called To Is One We Cannot Simply Think Through

One of the books I read during my doctoral studies really caught my attention on this. James K.A. Smith wrote a book called *You Are What You Love* – which would make a great title for a sermon, by the way!

In it he notes that we Enlightenment people — perhaps particularly those of us in the Reformed Protestant tradition — tend to think of ourselves as brains on a stick. We have taken to heart that famous line from Descartes: “I think, therefore I am.” And so we haven’t met a problem yet that can’t be solved by having a Bible study.

But Smith rightly asks:

What if, instead of starting from the assumption that human beings are thinking things, we started from the conviction that human beings are first and foremost lovers?

Because he’s right. I didn’t think my way into loving hockey. I played it and fell in love. I didn’t think my way into loving Chipotle. The first time I tasted it I was transported to a new and lovely place. And I didn’t think my way into my faith with Christ either. I fell in love with this big story of the God who loved me first.

Of course we should bring some thought to the game. Mindless faith isn’t really faith at all. But we are what we love. And Jesus called us to love just like him — which means if we want to love like him, we have to spend time with him, practice with him, imitate him. We have to let him be our mentor.

The Love We Are Called To Is One That Maybe Absolutely Nobody Notices

A few years ago, a friend told me a story I just couldn’t believe. He was working at a church as a youth pastor and had a congregant in the church who supported his ministry as best

as she could. She was in her nineties, and the way she supported his work was to tell him as often as she could about “nice young people” she came in contact with. I think it was her way of saying his work mattered.

One day she excitedly found him at church and said she had just had the best experience with a “nice young man.” She had been trying to park her car on the South Side, which even the most seasoned driver will tell you is not easy. She was having a rough go of it, and a young man on the sidewalk noticed. At first he tried to guide her in, pointing and gesturing. After a few attempts he knocked on the window and asked if he could help. She thanked him, he hopped into the driver’s seat, and he parked her car. When he finished she shook his hand.

And this is what she told my friend, verbatim: “He was such a nice young man, and he told me his name — it was such a unique name. He said his name was Sidney Crosby.”

She had no idea who he was. But the part of that story I love to this day: he didn’t need her to know who he was. He was content to do a loving deed completely anonymously. I don’t know what the Captain of the Penguins’ religious affiliation is, but that is loving just like Jesus. Are we ready for that?

The Love We Are Called To Is a Risk

Are you ready to take a risk on love in this season of life? Let me be specific about what that might cost you.

Risk Some Time

Love is probably going to cost you some space on the calendar. And I know — I have kids in hockey tournaments and band concerts, and that calendar is a precious resource. But if Jesus

took the time to wash his disciples' feet and asks us to love just like him, can we risk some time?

Risk Some Control

I'll be honest: I am a control freak. If my friends and I are going anywhere, I'm the first to offer to drive so I can be in control of the situation. But what if love takes us to places where we are not in control? What if it takes us to places we've never been? What if it takes us to places where we have to love people on their terms, not on ours? What if it takes us to the place where we come to learn we never had control in the first place? To love just like Jesus, we might have to lay our illusions of control on the table.

Risk Some Comfort

Moment of brutal honesty: most of us in this room have done a masterful job building a comfortable life. Most of us have just about everything we need. So, are we willing to risk some of that comfort? Are we willing to step into those humbling situations, the ones that will stick with us for a while? Are we willing to embrace the awkwardness of love, even when there are feet involved? Are we willing to risk being uncomfortable – even and only if it shows our brothers and sisters that they matter?

They'll Know

Because Jesus said, "By this everyone will know that you are my disciples." By your theology? No, that's not quite right. By your church attendance record? No, not that either. By your score on the Bible Content Exam? Lord, forbid.

No. We know the answer to this one.

“By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.” (John 13:35)

May You...

May you step out and take a big risk on love this week.

May you step into the humble, awkward, and sometimes downright messy means of love.

May our love look just like Jesus', and not like anyone else's.

And most of all, may we as the saints of Westminster Presbyterian Church be known the whole world over as Christ's disciples — purely and simply for the love we share with the world.

Amen.



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