

A Storytelling Commentary on John 13:31-35

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These words are the introduction to the longest speech to the disciples in the entire gospel tradition. In the context of the Gospel of John this is a major turning point in the relationship between Jesus as a character and those who are listening to John's story. The seven chapters preceding this (5-12) have been addressed to the audience as Jews who are torn between believing and not believing in Jesus. Beginning with chapter 13, and specifically beginning with this speech, the storyteller presenting Jesus turns to the audience and addresses them directly for the next five chapters as Jesus' disciples. It is an implicit invitation to move from being conflicted about Jesus to becoming his disciple.

These verses—John 13:31-35—introduce that long speech. Congregations following the lectionary are going to spend five weeks with this concluding address, John 13-17. I suggest that you learn and perform the whole speech with a group, either at the beginning or at the end of these five weeks. It is an unprecedented opportunity to hear and experience Christ's final words to us as his followers.

There is a very clear mnemonic structure in these episodes. The first episode is focused on the glorification of the Son of Man. The verbal thread can easily be identified: "the Son of Man has been glorified"; "God has been glorified"; "if God has been glorified, then God will also glorify him." It is a poem on the theme of "the Son of Man has been glorified." If you simply identify those phrases and learn them in their sequence, this is an easy episode to remember.

The next episode is a repetition of the verbal thread from earlier in the story: "little children, I am with you only a little longer"; "you will look for me and as I said to the Jews, I say to you, where I'm going you can't come." These are all verbal threads from earlier in the story. They're not necessarily helpful to you in relation to the context of learning this particular episode; they would be if you were learning the whole Gospel. However, the phrase "where I am going you cannot come" is easily remembered.

The last episode is the new commandment "that you love one another." That phrase—"love one another"—in various forms occurs in each of the phrases of this episode. It becomes a major theme throughout Jesus' final words to his disciples.

To summarize, the structure of the story is: glorification, with you only a little longer, love one another. In each instance, if you simply recognize where those phrases occur and learn them as chunks of material, this will be an easy discourse to learn by heart.

Now, more about the context of this story in the Gospel of John: it immediately follows the departure of Judas to betray Jesus. The climax of that episode is one of the shortest sentences in the whole gospel tradition: "It was night" (*an de nuxs*). This short sentence is

told slowly, with maximum emphasis on each word. This is the beginning of the time of the darkness of death in the story.

The setting at night carries the clear implication that Jesus will be killed soon and that this is the last time he will talk with the disciples. What is striking is that there is no note of self-pity or of concern about death in Jesus' speech. It is all focused on the disciples, on what they will do, and on the meaning of his death for them.

In order to experience the context of this story, I suggest that you read the story of the death of Socrates, as told by Plato is in his book, *Phaedo* (see online copy linked on the GoTell site at http://gotell.org/pages/stories/John/Jn13_31-35.html). This is a very poignant story in which Socrates at age 70 is found guilty of perverting the youth, is sentenced to death, drinks the poison and dies surrounded by his friends. Here is a passage from the story:

Then holding the cup to his lips, quite readily and cheerfully he drank off the poison. And hitherto most of us had been able to control our sorrow; but now when we saw him drinking, and saw too that he had finished the draught, we could no longer forbear, and in spite of myself my own tears were flowing fast; so that I covered my face and wept over myself, for certainly I was not weeping over him, but at the thought of my own calamity in having lost such a companion. Nor was I the first, for Crito, when he found himself unable to restrain his tears, had got up and moved away, and I followed; and at that moment. Apollodorus, who had been weeping all the time, broke out a loud cry which made cowards of us all. Socrates alone retained his calmness: What is this strange outcry? he said. I sent away the women mainly in order that they might not offend in this way, for I have heard that a man should die in peace. Be quiet, then, and have patience.

Socrates was the most eminent philosopher in Athens. The reasons for his death remain somewhat unclear. Two of his students, Asteudes and Pretias had twice briefly overthrown the democratic government of the city, and Socrates was blamed to some degree for the reign of terror that those two students of his instigated. He was also found guilty of perverting the youth by encouraging them to think independently, rather than just following what the elders said. The underlying reason is that people often misunderstand and hate their greatest leader. Plato's story is the story of a great leader in the ancient world.

Jesus' speech here has an even greater poignancy and impact. The first statement of is profoundly ironic because it anticipates his humiliating death by crucifixion. The words that Jesus uses are, "Now the Son of Man has been glorified and God has been glorified in him. Since he has been glorified in him then God will also glorify him in himself and will glorify him at once." What is the content of these words? It is that God has been glorified in Jesus' works, in the signs that he has done, and God will be glorified in his death and resurrection, and in response God will glorify him. This is a major theme in the prayer that concludes Jesus' speech (John 17).

There is also, implicit in Jesus' speech, recognition and understanding of his disciples' grief that he is going to die soon. He addresses that grief directly: "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." This is an indirect way of talking about his death. There is profound grief addressed in this statement that he will not be present with his friends. In effect he says, "I'm going to die soon and you cannot go where I'm going." That is, "You cannot follow me into death and glorification—in the way that I'm going to die and be glorified in the resurrection and ascension."

The commandment that follows this is surprising: "You must love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another." The climax of this brief introduction to Jesus' long speech is a statement of his love. The way in which they should cope with his death is to love one another. And the example of loving one another is Jesus' love for them.

This was a theme earlier in the story. For example, in the story of the raising of Lazarus (John 11), people said, "See how he loved him" when Jesus wept. In the good shepherd discourse (John 10), Jesus uses imagery describing a love relationship between the shepherd and the sheep saying, "the good Shepherd lays down his life for his sheep and they know his voice and they follow him." And early in the Gospel we are told, "God so loved the world that he gave his only Son" (John 3:16).

Jesus' reference to love is, therefore, an extension of a theme that has been present earlier in the story. It is also a continuation of the most basic commandment of Israel's faith as expressed in the Shema: "Hear O Israel, you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength."

In the other Gospels, Jesus interprets the Shema by setting the commandment to love God in the context of loving one's neighbor. In John, Jesus is more explicit. He shows what it means to "love one another." The sign to the world that he and his disciples love one another is to wash one another's feet.

He is also commenting on the significance of what he has just done. Jesus does not "out" Judas; he leaves him free to do what he chooses. Jesus' choosing not to accuse and condemn Judas directly is a supreme sign of love for the one who has made him his enemy and who will take the decisive initiative in bringing about his death.

The dynamic of this introduction is, then, that in response to his betrayal by one of his disciples whom he has loved, Jesus tells his disciples to love one another as he has loved them. He interprets his death as a glorification of God, and predicts that God will glorify him. I suggest that you tell this story in the spirit of Jesus dealing with the reality of the grief of his disciples, interpreting his own death, and explaining what it is that he would have his disciples do (love one another).

One of the ironies of the commandment "Love one another" is that often Christians are known, not for loving one another, but for hating one another. The history of Christian warfare against other Christians is a bloody history. So this saying has profound political as well as spiritual implications. Jesus' commandment that we love one another is true in local churches, it's true within the various parts of the church that have been divided over the centuries, and it's true of the potential that exists for Christians hating and making war against one another.

I remember the poster reading, "A modest proposal for peace: that Christians would not kill one another." Jesus' commandment remains a significant challenge and invitation for Christians today. A suggestion to all Christians is that we remember Jesus' commandment whenever we begin to feel anger or contempt for others in the Christian community. However, I also suspect that Jesus intended this commandment to extend to all the members of the human community. It is a very difficult commandment.