*Sermon 5th Sunday of Easter C, John 13, 31-35*Let *the words of* my *mouth, and the* meditation *of* all our *hearts, be much more acceptable in thy sight, O LORD,* our *strength, and* our *redeemer.*

One Sunday in a mass specially celebrated for married couples in a village in Croatia a priest preached about marriage. At the end of the service he was giving out small wooden crosses to each married couple. He said, "Place this cross in the room in which you quarrel the most and you will be reminded of Jesus' new commandment "love one another" and you won't argue much."
One woman came up and said: "Father, you had better give me ten crosses."

Though the gospel about love we’ve heard today fits really well in a wedding service, when Jesus preaches about love, and that we should love one another, it is not solely dedicated to married couples and not only for those who need lots of crosses at their walls…we all who follow Christ are drawn into this new commandment.

The gospel we’ve had this morning about the great commandment Jesus gave us on the night he was betrayed is the perfect complement to last week’s passage because it goes to the very heart of what
it means for us to follow Jesus.

Here, Jesus sums up Christian teaching in a couple of short, simple sentences: “I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this, everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love one for another.”

At the end of the day, when all the doctrine has been debated, when all the traditions have been lived out, when all the hymns have been sung and the liturgies read, we are left with just one thing: love.
It’s all about love – in the final analysis, love is all that is important.

Whatever else St. Augustine’s Church is about – it must be a place of love: where people encounter the love of God for them, where people feel loved and accepted for who they are, without judgement, where people are free to express love for others and back to God. (And I really think we are doing a good job with that)

It’s all about love.

And when Jesus gave this commandment to love, it wasn’t at a random time in his ministry: the timing of this statement by Jesus was so important. Because Jesus gave this teaching to his disciples the night before he was crucified; it was his final teaching to them before he died,
so he wasn’t going to waste time telling them stuff that isn’t important.

Instead, he goes to the heart of the Christian faith and is saying to them, “Before I die, this is what you really need to know: love one another…”

It’s almost as if the three years of his ministry had been building up to this moment and he was saying to them, “In conclusion, this is what you need to remember…”

It’s all about love.

That we are to love as Jesus has loved us…

OK, so what does that love look like? What does it mean for us to love one another as Jesus has loved us?

At the very heart of Christian faith is the fact that Jesus died on the cross; not some empty, meaningless, failing type of death, but a death that won a significant victory over the power of sin and death so that we could live in a beautiful relationship with God.

But, of course, that death was immensely sacrificial. Jesus had to give up everything so that we could live. There was no limit to Jesus’ sacrifice – because there was no limit to his love for us. Jesus became a sacrifice for us…

And so the fact that we love God and love others is a response to that. In another part of the Bible, also written by John, we can read that, “We love, because he first loved us”. Christ has shown unconditional love to us and, as a response, we model that love to others.

I wonder what that means in our lives? How can we show truly sacrificial love towards others? What can we give of ourselves – who we are and what we have – in order to love better? Christ is the model for us to follow and we have a lifetime to work out what that means for ourselves.

Jesus didn’t die for us because we deserved it. He didn’t die for us because we had somehow earned God’s grace and love. There is nothing that I have ever done that has made me deserving of a relationship with God. Instead, as the Bible tells us, he died for us even when we were far off and lost from God.

Jesus didn’t set conditions on his love. He never said that we need to do something first in order for him to love us. He never waited until we had proved ourselves worthy of love. Jesus’ love was absolutely unconditional.
This is really the good news – the unconditional love of Jesus.

And because Jesus loves us unconditionally, despite our weaknesses and failings, so we are called to love others unconditionally too.

I think in this day and age one of the most beautiful and precious gifts we have to offer is gentleness. We need gentle people. We need gentle Christians. We need people who are brave enough to live that commandment of love in our society. This is becoming such a harsh and judgemental society; where people immediately think the worst of everyone, where people are quick to judge, where people accuse migrants and refugees of taking jobs and homes, where nationalist and right wing parties stir up fear and hatred against all kind of people. Society in some parts is slipping back into a harshness and a prejudgment mentality that is sad and aggressive.

But we are called to a different way of living. We are called to gentleness and not to prejudge and a showing of unconditional love to all those we know and don’t know, even and especially the weak and vulnerable; and those who make a mess of their own lives. After all, that is what God has done for us: he is gentle with us! God doesn’t bear a grudge or give us a hard time for messing up so regularly, and we should follow in his footsteps by treating others with the same gentleness and patience and kindness as God has shown to us…

We are called to love: to meet the needs of others in pragmatic ways that speak of love and care and compassion. We can’t walk by on the other side of the road. We are to meet needs wherever and whenever we can.
So Jesus has a new commandment for us: not a new commandment to love but a new commandment to love one another as he has loved us. Sacrificially, unconditionally and practically.
That is the life we are called to. It is not easy – but love must be the hallmark of our church and our own lives. As the apostle Paul says: “if we don’t have love, we are nothing, our worship is empty, our hymn singing is empty, and all the activities of this church are empty and meaningless.”

It’s all about love.
And I want to close with a quote, not from the bible (!) but from an old fairy tale I once read:

An old fairy tale tells, that a young and curious king called all scholars of his kingdom together and instructed them to collect all the world’s wisdom together and to write it down.
The scholars and wise men immediately started with their work. After 40 years of work they presented their results in 1000 books to the king.
The king, who already reached the age of 60 years said to them: I will never be able to read 1000 books, cut your work down to the basics!
After ten more years the wise men presented the essential wisdom of humankind in 100 books to the king.

The king replied: That is still too much, I am already 70 years old. Cut your work down to the essential!
The scholars again continued their work and summarised the most important and basic things into one book. With this book, the result of decades of working and research, they went to the king, who was dying. Before he took his last breath, the king wanted to know the absolute essential, the very core of the world’s wisdom.

So the head of the research committee replied to the king: The most important thing, that counts and that lasts forever – is love!