

**“Christ and His People:
Rejecting or Receiving; Disowning or Loving”
John 13:12-32
June 21, 2020
Faith Presbyterian Church – Morning Service
Pastor Nicoletti**

We return again today to the Gospel of John.

Our text this morning will overlap a bit with our text last Lord’s Day.

Jesus and his disciples are gathered together for the Feast of Passover. Jesus has just washed the disciples’ feet. And we will begin this morning in verse twelve of chapter thirteen, as Jesus explains what he has done and what he is calling his disciples to. From there, has one interaction regarding Judas, and then one regarding Peter. It is those interactions that we will be focusing on this morning.

With all that in mind, let’s hear now from our text: John chapter thirteen, verses twelve through thirty-two.

Please listen carefully, for this is God’s Word for us this morning.

^{13:12} When [Jesus] had washed their feet and put on his outer garments and resumed his place, he said to them, “Do you understand what I have done to you? ¹³ You call me Teacher and Lord, and you are right, for so I am. ¹⁴ If I then, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another’s feet. ¹⁵ For I have given you an example, that you also should do just as I have done to you. ¹⁶ Truly, truly, I say to you, a servant is not greater than his master, nor is a messenger greater than the one who sent him. ¹⁷ If you know these things, blessed are you if you do them. ¹⁸ I am not speaking of all of you; I know whom I have chosen. But the Scripture will be fulfilled, ‘He who ate my bread has lifted his heel against me.’ ¹⁹ I am telling you this now, before it takes place, that when it does take place you may believe that I am he. ²⁰ Truly, truly, I say to you, whoever receives the one I send receives me, and whoever receives me receives the one who sent me.”

²¹ After saying these things, Jesus was troubled in his spirit, and testified, “Truly, truly, I say to you, one of you will betray me.” ²² The disciples looked at one another, uncertain of whom he spoke. ²³ One of his disciples, whom Jesus loved, was reclining at table at Jesus’ side, ²⁴ so Simon Peter motioned to him to ask Jesus of whom he was speaking. ²⁵ So that disciple, leaning back against Jesus, said to him, “Lord, who is it?” ²⁶ Jesus answered, “It is he to whom I will give this morsel of bread when I have dipped it.” So when he had dipped the morsel, he gave it to Judas, the son of Simon Iscariot. ²⁷ Then after he had taken the morsel, Satan entered into him. Jesus said to him, “What you are going to do, do quickly.” ²⁸ Now no one at the table knew why he said this to him. ²⁹ Some thought that, because Judas had the moneybag, Jesus was telling him, “Buy what we need for the feast,” or that he should give something to the poor. ³⁰ So, after receiving the morsel of bread, he immediately went out. And it was night.

³¹ When he had gone out, Jesus said, “Now is the Son of Man glorified, and God is glorified in him. ³² If God is glorified in him, God will also glorify him in himself, and glorify him at once. ³³ Little children, yet a little while I am with you. You will seek me, and just as I said to the Jews, so now I also say to you, ‘Where I am going you cannot come.’ ³⁴ A new commandment I

give to you, that you love one another: just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another. ³⁵ By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.”

³⁶ Simon Peter said to him, “Lord, where are you going?” Jesus answered him, “Where I am going you cannot follow me now, but you will follow afterward.” ³⁷ Peter said to him, “Lord, why can I not follow you now? I will lay down my life for you.” ³⁸ Jesus answered, “Will you lay down your life for me? Truly, truly, I say to you, the rooster will not crow till you have denied me three times.

This is the word of the Lord. (Thanks be to God.)

“All people are like grass, and all their glory is like the flowers of the field; the grass withers and the flowers fall, but the word of the Lord endures forever.” [1 Peter 1:24-25]

Let’s pray ...

Lord, we plead before you this morning,
to give us understanding according to your word.
Let our prayer come before you now,
and deliver us according to your promises.
Our lips this morning have poured out your praise,
because you teach us your statutes.
Our tongues have sung of your word,
because we know that all your commandments are right.
And so, as we attend now to your word,
grant us understanding and be at work in our hearts,
for Jesus’s sake. Amen.
[Based on Psalm 119:169-172]

There are two main interactions in this passage. The first one, in verses eighteen through thirty, focuses on Judas. The second one, in verses thirty-one through thirty-eight, focuses on Peter.

Each interaction begins with words from Jesus that thematically frame the interaction that follows. Each interaction displays something of what Jesus has just said. Each interaction will play out in the events that follow later on in John’s Gospel. And each interaction presents us with a significant link between how we relate to Jesus and how we relate to Jesus’s people – his Body, the Church.

So, with those categories in mind, I want to look at each of the two sections of this text, first in terms of what it tells us about our relationship to Jesus, and then in terms of how that relates to our relationship to the Church.

We’ll start by looking at verses eighteen through thirty, which focuses on Judas and the themes of receiving Jesus and his people or rejecting Jesus and his people – rejecting or receiving.

And that theme is especially brought out in verses twenty and twenty-one. Let’s hear those verses again. Jesus says:

²⁰ “Truly, truly, I say to you, whoever receives the one I send receives me, and whoever receives me receives the one who sent me.”

²¹ After saying these things, Jesus was troubled in his spirit, and testified, “Truly, truly, I say to you, one of you will betray me.”

The focus of the first section begins with this framework of reception or betrayal – of reception or rejection. This is the first set of alternatives that are put before us and they are put before us in the person of Judas.

Jesus speaks of the need to receive him. And he speaks of the one who will reject and betray him.

And then Jesus brings Judas to a point of decision.

That is, in many ways, what’s going on in verse twenty-six.

Jesus takes a morsel of bread, dips it, and gives it to Judas. And the significance of that can be lost on us.

In Jesus’s day, for the host of a meal to take a particularly good morsel of food from a common bowl and then pass it to a particular guest was a mark of honor or friendship. [Carson, 474; Wright, 52]

Jesus knows what Judas has decided to do. But before Judas finalizes in his heart his commitment to that decision, Jesus gives him one more expression of friendship. Jesus makes one more offer of acceptance. As one commentator puts it, this act of Jesus is a “final gesture of supreme love” to Judas, before Judas will make his final decision. [Carson, 474]

Once Jesus does that, as one writer puts it, Judas “is confronted with the starkest choice: rush forward immediately to execute his wretched plot, or renounce his evil and beg forgiveness.” [Carson, 472]

And what we see is that Judas chooses his wretched plot. He leaves the presence of Jesus, and as verse thirty highlights, he chooses to depart into the darkness.

And we need to appreciate that Judas’s choice was a real one. John highlights the role of Satan here, but we are never given the impression that Judas was taken over or possessed against his will. Judas faced a stark decision between Jesus and Satan – between the light and the darkness – and he chose Satan, he chose the darkness. He chose to receive Satan into his heart rather than Jesus. He chose to reject Jesus rather than Satan.

And it can be easy for us to dismiss the significance of this choice Judas faced – to say “Well ... it’s Judas! What do you expect?”

But the sobering thing about this passage was that no one except for Jesus seemed to expect it.

Jesus says in verse twenty-one that one of them is going to betray him, and note that the disciples don’t just turn to one another and say, “Judas! Duh!” [Keller]

No! Verse twenty-one says, “The disciples looked at one another, uncertain of whom he spoke.”

Even when Jesus tells them that the one he will give the morsel to is the one who will betray him, and he gives it to Judas, and Judas leaves, we are told in verses twenty-eight and twenty-nine that *still* they didn’t understand that it was Judas who would betray him.

And that should be a warning to all of us. The Judases in the Church are not obvious. They can hide. They can blend in. And not just from other people – they can also deceive themselves.

But the case of Judas is a reminder that it is not enough merely to be around Jesus. It is not enough merely to have formal membership among his people.

Judas was with Jesus throughout Jesus's earthly ministry. Judas was officially numbered among the twelve. But in his heart, he had not received Jesus. And ultimately, in his heart and then in his actions, he would reject Jesus.

The picture of Judas is a call to each of us to examine our own hearts. Are you actually engaged with Jesus in your heart – have you received him, do you place your faith in him, do you attend to his word from the heart, do you pray to him from the heart? Or is it all external – is it all on the outside, while your heart stays disconnected?

And by heart I don't just mean your emotions – but the core of your being. Are you committed to Christ at the core of your being, or is there a disconnect between your true self and your external relationship to Christ?

Judas is a call to each of us to ask ourselves those questions. And if we see that while we come to his house externally, and we are counted among his people externally, but our hearts are far from him, then we need to repent – we need to face the same stark decision that Judas did, but choose instead to confess our hardheartedness to Jesus, and ask for his grace to warm and soften our hearts.

But actually, there's more than that for us to do here.

Because lest we become too sympathetic towards Judas – as some tend to do – we should notice something else about him.

None of the other disciples expected Judas to be the betrayer – which means, of course, that Judas wasn't obviously evil or treacherous to them before this moment.

But also, none of the other disciples expected Judas ... which means that none of them actually knew his heart.

None of them knew of his struggles. None of them knew of his doubts. He had not shared with the other disciples if he was struggling to accept Jesus or the way Jesus was doing things. Judas did not let the other disciples into his heart and into his life enough to know what he was struggling with, where he was doubting, or what temptations he was facing.

Which should strike us especially in light of Jesus's words in verse twenty, where he says: "Truly, truly, I say to you, whoever receives the one I send receives me."

Judas in this passage makes his final decision to reject Jesus rather than to receive him. But before he made that final decision not to receive Jesus, he had already decided not to receive Jesus's people – the other disciples.

As he rejected one, so he rejected the other.

In a similar way, for others, the decision to reject Jesus does not often come out of the blue, but it is usually marked first with a rejection of Jesus's people – a rejection of the Church.

It might be overt, or it might be subtle. It might be a public repudiation of the Church, or, like Judas, it might be a quieter disconnection. We might be with and among the Church. We might be indistinguishable from other members of Christ's Church. But we keep our hearts, we keep our true selves, hidden from Jesus's people. We do not share our struggles. We do not receive Christ's people into our hearts. We wall our hearts off, like Judas. We put up a good external picture, but in our hearts Satan is whispering to us, and we are drifting away from Jesus, and nobody knows it but us.

Does that sound a little bit like you this morning? Have you kept God's people at arm's length? Do you have struggles and doubts that you keep only to yourself? Do you come on Sundays and put up a false, shiny image of yourself, and no one knows what is really going on in your heart besides you?

If that is you, then what is the alternative? What should you do?

Well, I think John actually gives us a little symbolic picture of that right here in this episode. On one end of these verses we have Judas, who refuses to receive Jesus or his disciples. But on the other end we have the brief interaction of Peter, John, and Jesus in verses twenty-two through twenty-six. It's such an odd thing to include, unless John has a point with it.

Jesus says something confusing. No one knows who he is talking about. Peter wants to better understand what Jesus has said – he wants to better receive Jesus's words. So what does he do? Interestingly, he doesn't ask Jesus directly. He asks someone who is closer to Jesus than he is. Peter asks John – here identified as the disciple "whom Jesus loved". Peter asks John so that John will ask Jesus, and then Peter might better understand Jesus.

Now in these verses the interaction is based on physical reality – it's based on how they are sitting. But to suddenly include those details into this text has the effect of giving us a picture that contrasts with Judas.

Judas cuts himself off from Jesus's people and so cuts himself off from Jesus in the end.

Peter, on the other hand, desiring to better receive Jesus, turns to another believer – turns to John – and asks for his help, and John helps Peter better understand Jesus.

And we are called to do the same thing spiritually. We are called – when we are confused, when we are struggling, when we are farther from Jesus, when for any reason we are having trouble – we are called to turn to our brothers and sisters in Christ and seek their help. And they are called to help us better connect to Christ. And as we receive their help, so we receive his help, for, as Jesus says here, "Whoever receives the one I send, receives me."

Where have you walled your heart off from God's people and so walled your heart off from God? Where do you need to seek and to receive the help of one or more of God's people, so that you might better draw closer to Christ?

What do you need to do to better receive both Jesus and his people? How do you need to fight against the temptation to reject one and, in the end, both?

That is the first set of questions our text puts before us.

The second set comes in verses thirty-one through thirty-eight, and focuses on Peter.

And once again the passage begins with words from Jesus that should frame the interaction that follows. Jesus says in verses thirty-four and thirty-five:

³⁴“A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another: just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another. ³⁵By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.”

Jesus here connects the love between him and his people to the love that is supposed to be between his people, with a command to love one another as he has loved them.

And Peter’s response is to proclaim his love for Jesus in his willingness to die for him.

He says, in verse thirty-seven: “Lord, why can I not follow you now? I will lay down my life for you.”

Jesus has spoken of love, and Peter is proclaiming the extent of his love for, and dedication to, Jesus.

But Jesus stops him. And in verse thirty-eight Jesus basically tells Peter that Peter has overestimated himself.

Peter has proclaimed his willingness to die for Jesus, and Jesus says: “Will you lay down your life for me? Truly, truly, I say to you, the rooster will not crow till you have denied me three times.”

Now ... Peter is a believer. Peter *has* received Jesus. Peter is no Judas. But his love for Jesus was not actually as great as he thought it was.

Peter is confident here in chapter thirteen. But a few chapters later he will face the question in much harder circumstances. And then he will deny and disown Jesus.

When things were comfortable, and things were easy, Peter overestimated his love for and his dedication to Jesus. As one writer puts it: “Good intentions in a secure room after good food are far less attractive in a darkened garden with a hostile mob. At this point in his pilgrimage, Peter’s intentions and self-assessment vastly outstrip his strength.” [Carson, 486]

And we can do the same thing.

It’s easy to *say* we love Jesus. It’s easy to proclaim to ourselves or to others that we would be willing to sacrifice everything – even be willing to die – for him.

But often we don’t really know ourselves. Often our “self-assessment vastly outstrip[s] [our actual] strength.”

What are we to do about that?

How are we to better know ourselves? How are we to increase our spiritual strength and our spiritual love and our dedication to our Lord?

Well, I think that Peter's story shows us that verses thirty-four and thirty-five are key to answering that question.

Let's hear them again. Jesus says to his disciples:

³⁴ "A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another: just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another. ³⁵ By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another."

Jesus connects our love for his people to our love for him. But how are those connected in the story of Peter?

Well, to better see that, we should consider the end of Peter's story in John's gospel. After Jesus's resurrection, Jesus comes, risen from the dead, and he meets with the disciples.

And when he does, he restores Peter. Let's read what he says to him, from John 21 – there we read:

¹⁵ When they had finished breakfast, Jesus said to Simon Peter, "Simon, son of John, do you love me more than these?" He said to him, "Yes, Lord; you know that I love you." He said to him, "Feed my lambs." ¹⁶ He said to him a second time, "Simon, son of John, do you love me?" He said to him, "Yes, Lord; you know that I love you." He said to him, "Tend my sheep." ¹⁷ He said to him the third time, "Simon, son of John, do you love me?" Peter was grieved because he said to him the third time, "Do you love me?" and he said to him, "Lord, you know everything; you know that I love you." Jesus said to him, "Feed my sheep. ¹⁸ Truly, truly, I say to you, when you were young, you used to dress yourself and walk wherever you wanted, but when you are old, you will stretch out your hands, and another will dress you and carry you where you do not want to go." ¹⁹ (This he said to show by what kind of death he was to glorify God.) And after saying this he said to him, "Follow me."

Jesus here gives Peter three opportunities to, in a sense, un-do his previous denials and his words of disowning. Three times Peter has denied Jesus, and so three times Jesus calls on Peter to confess his love for him again.

But then, each time, Jesus does not leave it there – he doesn't leave it at mere words. He tells Peter what to do – how to fully repent and show his love for him, for Jesus. And what he tells him to do is to love Jesus's sheep – to love Jesus's people. "Feed my lambs," he says. "Tend my sheep," he says. "Feed my sheep," he says.

The idea seems to be a lot like what we read in verses thirty-four and thirty-five of our text: If you love him, if you are his disciple, then Jesus's call is for you to love his people. If we would love him, we must love his people.

And what is striking about Jesus's reinstatement of Peter here in chapter twenty-one is that Jesus doesn't just say these two things *should* go together, but he seems to be saying that one helps the other.

Because at the very end of that passage in chapter twenty-one, Jesus tells Peter that Peter *will* in fact lay down his life for him – for Jesus. Just not yet.

Peter said he was ready here in chapter thirteen to lay down his life for Jesus. But he wasn't ready yet.

Jesus tells him in chapter twenty-one that one day he will be ready – one day he will lay down his life for Jesus.

But how will he get ready? How will he increase his love for Jesus and his spiritual strength to be able to do that?

He will feed Jesus's lambs. He will tend Jesus's sheep. He will love Jesus's people just as Jesus has loved him. And as he does, he will learn to love Jesus more and more. As he does, his spiritual strength and steadfastness will increase.

Without loving Jesus's people, love of Jesus easily becomes an abstract intellectual concept.

It reminds me of another passage from Feodor Dostoevsky's *Brothers Karamazov*. In the novel, Dostoevsky tells us of a man – a doctor. He writes: "He was an old man, and unquestionably intelligent. He spoke [...] frankly [...], humorously, but with a sorrowful humor. 'I love mankind,' he said, 'but I am amazed at myself: the more I love mankind in general, the less I love people in particular, that is, individually, as separate persons. In my dreams,' he said, 'I often went so far as to think passionately of serving mankind, and, it may be, would really have gone to the cross for people if it were somehow suddenly necessary, and yet I am incapable of living in the same room with anyone even for two days, this I know from experience. As soon as someone is there, close to me, his personality oppresses my self-esteem and restricts my freedom. In twenty-four hours I can begin to hate even the best of men: one because he takes too long eating his dinner, another because he has a cold and keeps blowing his nose. I become the enemy of people the moment they touch me,' he said. 'On the other hand, it has always happened that the more I hate people individually, the more ardent becomes my love for humanity as a whole.'" [Dostoevsky, 57]

I think that often, for us Christians, we can have the same division between abstractly loving Christ, but hating Christ's actual people.

As wise Christians have long pointed out, the Christian martyrs – those who gave their lives for Christ – for the most part did not just suddenly rise to that level of spiritual maturity. Far more often, those whose love and dedication to Christ made them willing to give even their lives for him learned that love and dedication by dying to themselves thousands of times, in countless acts of sacrificial love for Christ's people, over and over again, before they made the ultimate sacrifice for Christ.

The same is true for Peter. He will need to love Christ's people, to feed Christ's sheep, for years. And through that his true love and dedication to the Lord will grow into something real, rather than just words. And then he will be ready to give his life for Christ.

And the same is true for us. If we declare our love for the Lord, but have no love for his people in concrete ways – we are not willing to make even modest sacrifices for them, we are not willing to

sacrifice any of our goods, or comforts, or rights for their good – then we, like Peter, are exposed in our own self-delusions.

If we claim to love Christ, but we are selfish with our spouse, and short-tempered with our children, and lack humility, kindness, or gentleness with fellow believers around us, then we are exposed for having a long way to go in truly loving our Lord.

Now, don't hear what I'm not saying. Peter was a true believer. We can be true believers with insufficient love and dedication for our Lord – *all* Christians have insufficient love and dedication for our Lord in this life.

But if we want to assess our love for Christ, we should consider how we keep this new commandment – how we love one another.

As one commentator puts it, Jesus's command to love others as he has loved us "is simple enough for a toddler to memorize and appreciate, [and] profound enough that the most mature believers are repeatedly embarrassed at how poorly they comprehend it and put it into practice." [Carson, 484]

"Love one another," Christ says. "Just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another."

But this commandment is good not only for self-assessment. It is also good for spiritual direction.

If we want to love our Lord, if we want to grow in our ability to love our Lord, and in our dedication to him, then as we trust him and rely on him by faith, we should pursue sacrificial love towards those around us. In big ways, yes. But also in the many small everyday ways.

Where do you need to enact that love in tangible concrete ways with those that the Lord has placed in your life?

These episodes here in John thirteen can be discouraging to us. Judas is certainly a sobering story, in his choice of rejecting rather than receiving Christ and his people. Peter's case is also somber, as he disowns rather than loves both his Lord and the people of his Lord.

But as we receive Christ by faith – as we rely on him and his grace – our text also has great encouragement for us.

Because even when Judas was far from him, Jesus held out an offer of repentance and forgiveness along with that morsel of bread.

And so, even if you have not embraced Christ from the heart, his offer stands before you. You are the only thing that would stand in your way. This morning you can embrace him – or at least begin by embracing his people and telling them where your heart *really is* right now.

And, then, as we turn to Peter, we should be sure to note that Jesus did not wait for him to get his act together before Jesus died for him. Jesus knew the state of Peter's heart. He knew how flimsy his loyalty would be under pressure. But Jesus still called him one of his own. Jesus still went to the cross for Peter. And then, after he rose from the dead, Jesus sought him out and restored him – forgiving his sin and directing him again to the road of repentance.

And so our Lord does with us. He knows how far short we fall – far better than we know it ourselves. And yet he does not abandon us. He does not leave us. But he has already died for us – long before we got our acts together. And when we fail, he does not condemn us for our lack of love for him or for our self-delusions – but he calls us back to himself, he restores us once more, and he points us again to the road of repentance: the call to love one another as he has loved us.

This morning, you need to hear and to receive every aspect of that.

You need to receive both him and his people – opening your hearts to both, that you might truly know your Lord.

You need to let him reveal your sinful shortcomings, as he does for Peter in verse thirty-eight.

You need to hear and receive his word of grace and restoration, as Peter did in chapter twenty-one.

And then you need to receive and follow his call, in the ordinary and mundane arenas of life, to love those he puts before you, just as he has loved you.

And as you do, you will grow in true love for him, and all will know that you really are his disciple.

Amen.

This sermon draws on material from:

Carson, D.A. *The Gospel According to John*. PNTC. Grand Rapids,

Dostoevsky, Fyodor, *Brothers Karamazov*. Translated by Richard Pevear and Larissa Volokhonsky. New York, NY: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1990.

Keller, Timothy. This sermon draws from a sermon I heard from Timothy Keller years ago, but was not able to locate for citation.

Wright, N. T. *John for Everyone, Part 2: Chapters 11-21*. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2004.