

Marks of Our Identity: The Church Defined

Union Community Bible Church, NJ

Text: John 13:34-35; also 1 John 4:7-21

³⁴ I am giving you a new commandment, that you love one another; just as I have loved you, that you also love one another. ³⁵ By this all people will know that you are My disciples: if you have love for one another.”

Introduction:

We have lost the art of wondering about love. What I mean is to be in awe of love. What is love nowadays? We have reduced it to a simple flower, a bar of chocolate, or an utterance. The same with snow, at first, like me, I am in awe of seeing how white the snow is, and how it majestically fall from the sky. But now, after two days, after a week, oh my... it looks dirty, it's hard to plow it, and it does not look good at all. I have lost the awe-factor whenever I see snow. It always makes me think in advance that it will bring a lot of hassle, or even in our context, expect that the church will be moved via zoom.

Background:

This missing out on the awe and wonder is also the same to our church nowadays. At first, when we were still new Christian, we are on fire. If able, you want to shout that you are now part of that church or even this church. Yet after several years, even your neighbors do not know that you are a Christian. How about your workmates? Do they know what church you belong to?

How about asking, who is the Church? What is the distinguishing mark of a church as compared with different non-profit institutions? In a sense, when was the last time the church, or maybe even just the leaders, discussed the matters of the church when it comes to its doctrinal statement? When was the last time the church baptized a new believer? How about asking who can partake in the Lord's Supper? Those who are only baptized as a member, or even from the other church, or anyone even those were not baptized yet as long as they have confessed that they believe in Christ?

Well, I will not be talking about the broad ecclesiological doctrines today. Of course, if I will, it will take maybe a whole year to discuss this topic every Sunday. Instead, I hope the church will create a venue for us to learn these important matters to define who we really are, as a church, when it comes to these many questions. So let us return to our message for today.

Last Sunday, I asked you if do we bear the marks of Jesus? Today, we will talk about the distinguishing mark as followers of Christ—specifically, what does it mean to be a church.

In the last verses in John 13, this part is known to be a preparation of Christ's farewell discourse to His disciples. This talk is after He has washed the feet of His disciples. What is the connection of this one to our theme? This preparatory speech of Christ is a picture of what will be the future after His death, resurrection, and the outpouring of the Holy Spirit.

The disciples are confused about what will happen in the future; they are all expecting that Christ will now, in their time, enact the final messianic call, which is to deliver their nation from the hands of the Roman Empire. Yet, they failed to comprehend Christ's point that there will be no revolutionary war, no violence, and no hatred. They were surprised that instead of all these things, Christ called them to love Him and love others.

Main Idea:

Indeed, our main theme for today is about love. This love is not in a reduced form just like what I said a while ago. This love makes us wonder and be in awe of many great and beautiful things about God, life, and our church.

To start with, a distorted understanding of ourselves and our identity in Christ will distort our identity as a church. That is why, I discussed in the first sermon of our *Defined* series about our identity as an image of God two weeks ago, then our identity as a redeemed person in Christ last week.

The first mark of our identity as a church is having the mark of Christ, **the Love Personified**.

In our passages, it is evident that the source of our love is Christ. It is Christ who was speaking here; he was talking to His disciples. We cannot truly love unless someone gives us love or truly loves us. Again, we have heard this statement, "you cannot share or give something that you do not have." In the same manner, how can a person truly love without experiencing love or knowing love?

Remember, we were created in the image of God out of His overflowing love. We know, as a person that we are sinners and we fall short in His standard as written in Romans 3:10 and verse 23. With this idea in our mind, even our love is marred by sin. It is a kind of love that is insufficient; it is a corrupted love and a broken love. No wonder when we try to love someone, it feels inadequate. It seems that is not enough. Apart from God's love, it is easy for us to get tired of loving someone or something.

Similar to our younger generation, but also applicable to the adults, we are trying to find real love somewhere out there, in the fallen world, abounding with sin, immorality, and sexual lusts. Then after a while, what happens? We are left broken, shattered into pieces like a glass that was dropped and stepped upon again and again until our hearts are like grains of sand in the ocean.

Yes, churches also try to be like this shallow love today, we tend to exchange temporal love just to be relevant and to be on the hook or be part of what is trending today. But at the end of the day, it does not feel worthy, it is unfulfilling and senseless. We have lost the real essence of a church that loves.

Let us return to our passage, read in verse 34, the phrase "I am giving you..." means that it is Christ who gives and gave his love to us. Then there is a correlative conjunction "just," "just as I have loved you." See? This conjunction means that unless our church—you and me—genuinely feel and experience God's love personified in Christ's incarnation, only then we can truly know ourselves as a church.

This identity is connected to our individual identity. Remember last Sunday, that at the very core of our identity and the very covering of our identity are both in Christ. Likewise, as a church—the body of Christ—we are marked by His identity as a loving church because Christ is the love personified.

What do I mean by love personified? Christ is the “love” who became flesh. He is the embodiment of love. Read 1 John 4:7-9,

“Beloved, let’s love one another; for love is from God, and everyone who loves has been born of God and knows God. ⁸ The one who does not love does not know God, because God is love. ⁹ By this the love of God was revealed in us, that God has sent His only Son into the world so that we may live through Him.”

God is love. This love—who is God—was revealed in us through Christ’s incarnation. Incarnation means God becoming flesh, Christ being a man so that we can experience this great, full of awe, and wonderful love. That is the first mark of our identity as a church, Christ-centered, Christ as the Head of the church, and Christ being experienced within the church.

What does it mean when I say experiencing Christ within the church? That is our second distinguishing mark called **Love Covenanted (or Established)**.

Now that we have understood that it was Christ who gives love and love itself, then the next thing to realize is that this talk was given to His chosen people. Christ was talking to His disciples in a manner where He sees the unfolding of events in the future. He has given them a “new commandment,” to have this kind of transaction implies that they have an intimate relationship with Jesus. This relationship is an established relationship sealed by God as we already know afterward.

This commandment pertains to loving one another as a manifestation of Christ’s love and as part of the covenantal promise. This covenant can be traced back to God’s promise to Abraham, Moses, and to David. Hence, the ultimate mark of being a covenantal community or family is to manifest this kind of love. No wonder Christ called them as His disciple if they love another, just as how Christ loves them.

In short, the manifestation of love as a church is a mark of being Christ’s disciple. To be a disciple of Christ requires to be part of a covenantal community. Therefore, as far as I have studied the Bible, it is clear that a Christian must be part of a covenanted family also known as a local church.

Hear me out, do you know why a person cannot be an island? We have the saying that “*no man is an island,*” right? Do you know why it is true? It is because we cannot contain the intrinsic love that we have as a created image of God. “*We are a loving creature,*” as Christian philosopher James K. A. Smith says. It is natural for us to love. Ultimately, if we are Christians we ought to love.

We need to express this love that we have to someone else, in a broader sense, to a community. We are a self-loving being, just as God is, but the difference is that God is love, and we depend on Him as the source of our love. With this truth in our hearts, we realize that “love” as a distinguishing mark of the church is natural and essential.

Hence, just as God made a covenant to His people out of love, we also manifest this love, which was made visible or established. That is why we need to acknowledge our covenantal relationship with each other as a church. Let us read our *Church Covenant* (2001, updated 2011):

Having received Christ as our Lord and Savior and been baptized, and being in agreement with Union Community Bible Church statements, strategy, and structure, **we freely and joyfully commit ourselves to God and to other members** to do the following:

1. **We will protect the unity of our church** by acting in love toward other members; by refusing to gossip; by following the leaders (Romans 15:9, 1 Peter 1:22, Ephesians 4:29, Hebrews 13:7).
2. **We will share the responsibility of our church** by praying for its growth; by inviting the unchurched to attend; by warmly welcoming those who visit (1 Thessalonians 1:2, Romans 15:7).
3. **We will serve the ministry of our church** by discovering our gifts and talents; by being equipped to serve by our Pastor; by developing a servant's heart (1 Peter 4:10, Ephesians 4:11-12).
4. **We will support the testimony of our church** by attending faithfully; by living a godly life; by giving regularly (Hebrews 10:25, Philippians 1:27, 1 Corinthians 16:2).

Remember that Christ died for the church and He identifies Himself to the church as His body (Acts 20:28; 9:4). Meaning, it is important to be part of this established love. How? We listen to each other's stories, journey with those who grieve, be with those who struggle in anxiety and depression, to those who celebrate successes, and cry with those who are in pain. In a word, the person that belongs in our church is worth our love, and we should love them. See them as part of your life and journey with them. (Do not worry, even in heaven you will still see them there, so practice loving them now).

As it pertains to the commandment of Christ in 1 John 4:21, *"And this commandment we have from Him, that the one who loves God must also love his brother and sister."*

Christ is the first and greatest mark of our identity as a church; second, Christ being made visible through the Spirit's work in the church as a covenanted people. Lastly, our final mark, Christ being proclaimed in this loving community. Our third mark is **Love Proclaimed**.

I would be bold here, as a pastor, my first priority is to preach Christ always and forever in this very pulpit. (*wait we do not have a pulpit here right now, but I know you get my point*). I give you permission to lovingly and graciously talk to me and ask me to leave if I start preaching other stuff that is not about Christ. If I don't preach Christ anymore, tell in front of me, *"pastor JP, I think you've been preaching no Christ at all. You can start packing your books, since I only have books with me, and go back to your place."*

Why am I saying these words? Back in our passage, the phrase in verse 35, *"By this, all people will know..."* means that others, the world, our community, your workplaces, or even your family will know that you are a Christian.

By loving one another we proclaim God's love and we model the true church as a loving church. Indeed, to be a church is to be a loving community.

In verses 10-12 of 1 John state, *“In this is love, not that we loved God, but that He loved us and sent His Son to be the propitiation for our sins. ¹¹ Beloved, if God so loved us, we also ought to love one another. ¹² **No one has ever seen God; if we love one another, God remains in us, and His love is perfected in us.**”*

This mark of proclaiming love to the world is the distinguishing mark of the church. This mark separates us from other NGOs. In summary, as a church, first and foremost, we portray Christ as his body; second, we exemplify this love by loving one another as a covenanted family; finally, we proclaim this love to others by living in and living out as a model of what it means to really love.

Pastor JP, can we achieve these marks? In 1 John 4:19, *“We love, because He first loved us.”* We can because we have Christ as our source of love, our model for loving, and living out this love by laying His life for us. If you truly want to experience real love, then make sure to live out Christ’s love in our church and be part of it, not just as an observer but a participant of this covenantal relationship with each other. From here, the world will see how we live out the gospel in our lives as well as proclaiming to them the good news about His love.

Conclusion:

The true church bears the distinguishing mark of Christ; this mark of identity is known as LOVE. This love is personified in Christ, made visible through His covenantal relationship with His chosen people—the church, and ought to be proclaimed as a manifestation of being the true church.

What is the purpose of John writing both the gospel of John and his first epistle?

John 20:30-31, *“So then, many other signs Jesus also performed in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book; but these have been written **so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God; and that by believing you may have life in His name.**”*

1 John 5:13, *“These things I have written to you who believe in the name of the Son of God, **so that you may know that you have eternal life.**”*

A loving church yields to this promise and certainty; the promise of having “life”—a life eternal and a life worthy of loving Christ and others. May this preaching remind us to be a loving community to ourselves and outside the circle of the church.

For my final words, “Live your life by loving **Christ**, loving the **Church**, and your **Community.**”

Ptr. John Paul Arceno

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UCBC New Jersey