Fifth Sunday of Easter, May 18, 2025 Pastor Chris Repp
John 13:31-35 Grace Lutheran Church, Champaign, Illinois

Alleluia, Christ is risen! (Christ is risen indeed, Alleluia!)
Grace, mercy, and peace to you in the name of Jesus Christ. Today's Gospel reading gets down to the point of it all: love one another. This is Jesus' new commandment for his disciples. If they can just do that, that one simple thing – love one another as Jesus has loved them – then they will have proven to be worthy disciples and witnesses to who Jesus is. And that is true also for us. So let's all do that: let us love one another as Jesus loved us. Amen, end of sermon.

If only it were that easy. I got into a discussion in the Lutheran pastors' Facebook group recently about some of the finer points of Lutheran theology when someone, who was really not interested in the discussion, observed in passing that Jesus' summary of the commandments, "love God and love your neighbors" was their guiding light. Now, you can hardly object to that. And I didn't. In fact, I responded by saying, "I'm all about that too. And if we could actually do that, then we would never have to say anything more." The problem is, of course, that we *can't* just do that, and that's why we unfortunately *have* to say more. That, in fact, is why *Jesus* had to say more – and *do* more – than merely teaching that one central principle.

Still, loving one another remains Jesus' goal for us. But what do you do when your one goal for your disciples is far beyond their capabilities, or even their inclinations? Well, you go back to square one. You start over. And that is what this Gospel reading today, I think, is really about. But it only makes sense in the context of the entirety of John's Gospel. Let's see if I can make that connection for us.

This short Gospel reading comes soon after the text we heard back on Maundy Thursday, the one where Jesus stuns his disciples by washing their feet, performing for them the lowliest task of a servant as an example of how they are to relate to one another. So the new commandment that we hear today is part of a theme that Jesus has already introduced. But in between these two readings are verses in which Jesus foretells Judas' betrayal. He then tells Judas to "go and do quickly" what he is going to do. So Judas leaves, and John writes this: "And it was night."

This kind of information in John is never simply a chronological detail. It is highly significant. You might remember that the famous encounter between Jesus and the friendly Pharisee Nicodemus back in chapter three took place at night. That too was not simply about the time of day. It was about the condition of the world. Nicodemus was in the dark, literally and figuratively and Jesus spoke about himself as the light that has come into the world.

Something like that is happening in today's reading, but we might not catch it without a little digging. Here in chapter 13 it is again night, and the next thing Jesus says is this: "now the Son of Man has been glorified." Glory is one of those churchy words we don't use much in ordinary speech. But it is an important idea in the Bible, and it is hugely important in the Gospel according to John. In fact, scholars divide the Gospel into two major sections, which they call the Book of Signs and the Book of Glory. The Book of Signs begins in chapter two with the wedding at Cana and ends with the raising of Lazarus and the aftermath of that event. The Book of Glory begins here in chapter 13. For our purpose right now the important thing to know about glory is that it is connected with the idea of light. I can give you lots of examples, but maybe the easiest is the Christmas story of the shepherds, watching their flocks by night. Remember when the angel shows up and "the glory of the Lord shone around them"? So when Jesus is talking about glory and being glorified, he is talking about light. If you were to stage this part of John,

you would have the stage darkened at the words “and it was night,” and then you would have a bright spotlight shine on Jesus as he says, “Now the Son of Man has been glorified.” And that spotlight would stay on Jesus throughout his crucifixion. Because unlike the other three Gospels, where it goes dark as Jesus is crucified, it never goes dark in John during the crucifixion. John is making a point. The cross, the terrible, cruel instrument of intimidation, humiliation, and torture, is Jesus’ glory. The cross is emblematic of humankind’s darkest inclinations, the worst that we can do to one another. But it is, paradoxically, Jesus’ time to shine. As John told us already at the very beginning of his Gospel, Jesus is the light that shines in the darkness, and the darkness does not overcome it.

John wants us to remember that now here in chapter 13 as Jesus prepares to go to the cross. What Jesus is doing here is what he was doing at the beginning of the world, when “darkness covered the face of the deep.” Jesus’ death and resurrection, in other words, are bringing about new creation. This has to happen because new creation is the only way we get to the life that God intendeds for us. And that is reinforced in John by what comes next. After today’s reading ends, Peter declares that he will lay down his life for Jesus, but Jesus responds that Peter will instead deny him. It is not what we do for Jesus that saves us. Because when it comes right down to it, we simply cannot save ourselves from the powers of sin, death, and evil that infect us and our world. This reading today is bracketed by human betrayal and denial at the hands of those closest to Jesus. It does not get any darker than that.

But the light shines in the darkness, and the darkness does not overcome it. By announcing his glorification in this context Jesus is saying, “here we go again. I’ve done this before, and I can do it again. I faced the deep darkness at the beginning of creation and brought forth light and life. I will face this darkness now. Watch me light up the night!”

There can be no better news for us, lost in the night of sin, death, and evil. There can be no better news for us who are not only victims of those powers, but aiders and abettors, like Judas and Peter, we who love the darkness rather than the light, and who prefer human glory to the glory of God. There can be no better news for us than the light coming into our darkness, refusing to let our betrayal and denial be the last words, drawing us to his light and in the waters of baptism bringing forth a new creation in us and in the world. In the light of this new creation is life, life that really is life. And when that life takes hold of us, our hearts are made new, and we learn that Jesus’ new commandment is not simply one more rule to follow, but is woven into the fabric of this new life. And we begin to love one another because that is who we are, beloved children of God, reborn in baptism to a life that can’t help but love the world that God first loved in Jesus. I don’t have to tell you to do it. It’s who you are, because Christ is risen, Alleluia! (Christ is risen indeed, Alleluia!) End of sermon.