

Strike Up The Band!

Based on John 13:31-35

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A junior high music teacher took it upon herself to organize a band at her school. It was something that the school never had. She knew how much her students would gain by being a part of a band, and so she thought it was worth the extra time and effort.

The principal took note of her efforts and became so excited about this new musical group that he decided – without consulting the band director – that the band should give a concert for the entire school. When the band director got word of this, she tried her best to explain to the principal that the students weren't ready yet to give a concert. We need more time, the band director pleaded, to no avail. The concert would go on.

Minutes before curtain time, the band director panicked. She whispered to her nervous musicians, "Now, if you're not sure of your part, just pretend to play." And with that, the curtain opened. As the baton went down signaling the first note, lo and behold, nothing happened. The band brought forth a resounding silence.

Is the church like that junior high band? Sometimes we are unsure of what part we are to play in God's kingdom, making us reluctant to sound forth music of faith in our daily life. We aren't always sure what God is up to – much less what our part is in God's plan – and so, much like that junior high band, we sit on stage but never play a note. All too often, for far too many of us, when it comes to our faith, all that is heard is a resounding silence.

It's not supposed to be that way. That's not the way God intended faith to be. Faith is a gift. Martin Luther, in his Small Catechism, reminds us that we do not come to faith by our own understanding or effort. Faith is not something that we acquire by doing the right things. No, faith is a gift, the Bible teaches. God plants the gift of faith within our hearts that day we are baptized. Then God sends the Holy Spirit upon us to nurture and grow that gift of faith throughout our lives.

Faith is a gift. So by definition, our faith is meant to be shared. A gift is not a gift unless you share with one someone, right? If I am invited to a birthday party and go out and buy a present for that celebration, it really doesn't become a gift until I offer it to someone. So it is with faith. God intended us to share our faith so that others might come to know the good and gracious God that we have experienced in our own lives.

So how are we to share our faith? God makes it super clear. God narrows it down to one word: LOVE. "Just as I have loved you," Jesus says, "love one another." The way Jesus words it is very telling. Jesus uses himself as the example. Just as I have loved you, love one another.

Just as I have forgiven you, forgive each other.

Just as I have been there for you when life is difficult, be there for others when they are going through rough times.

Just as I have provided for your daily bread, find ways to provide others with their daily bread.

When we look at the way Jesus lived his life, the manner in which we are to love others becomes quite obvious.

The Gospel today from John 13 is Jesus' farewell speech to his disciples. They are Jesus' parting words to his disciples, to us. Over and over again, Jesus emphasizes love. As Christians, love must be our guiding principal.

If what you say is not spoken in love, then don't say it, Jesus says.

If it's not done in love, then don't do it.

If it's not given in love, then don't give it, Jesus says.

In everything we say and do, if love is not our sole motivation, then we need to reexamine our hearts, Jesus says. The book of 1 John teaches us, "Anyone who loves is a child of God and knows God. But anyone who does not love does not know God, for God is love."

Each week as we gather in this holy place, we remember and proclaim that the greatest blessing God has given us is love. That love came in the form of a person – the person of Jesus Christ, God's Son.

Jesus embodied the very love of God. If we want to know the true nature of God's love – what God would say and do, how God would respond, what God holds dear – we must simply look to Jesus. Jesus fully embodies the love of God.

If we want to know what true love looks like and how it acts, then we must hang around with Jesus. This is why regular worship and daily devotions are so important. When we don't spend enough quality time with Jesus, we lose sight of what we are to be about. We lose sight of what is most important – loving God and loving our neighbor.

Today many of you sport our church T-shirt. Four “G” words appear on them: Gather. Grow. Give. Go. Think about it. None of those words would be possible without God’s love.

It is because of God’s redeeming love – secured through the death and resurrection of Jesus, poured out upon us the day we were baptized – God’s redeeming love makes us worthy to *gather* in this place, to worship God and to support and pray for one another.

It is God’s revealing love that inspired the Holy Scriptures to be written down, allowing us to truly know God our Father and to *grow* in our faith and devotion to God’s kingdom.

We all have been richly blessed by God’s generous love, making it possible for each of us to *give* of ourselves that others may know of God’s gracious love.

And it is God’s equipping love that sends us forth from this place – that calls us to *go* from this place to tell others about the Good News of Jesus Christ.

Each and every time we gather together, we experience what might be called a “LOVEFEST” where God’s love reveals itself time and time again, in so many ways.

And the amazing love that we experience here in this place should change us. It should transform us from timid, unsure people to bold believers, ready and willingly to sound forth the music of faith in our daily lives.

So strike up the band, Jesus says. You have a song to play – a tune of love that the world is literally dying to hear; a tune of love that has the power to change people’s lives, just as it changed your life, and mine.

Think about it. Who were those people who played God’s love song to you? Think about how their willingness to play God’s love song for you changed your life. Think about how different your life would be had they remained silent.

Now think about those people you encounter who have not heard the marvelous melody of God’s love song. They are people who feel alone and hopeless; people who have this hunger in their heart but don’t know quite how to fully satisfy it; people who just can’t forgive themselves for something they did in the past; people who don’t think they are good enough or smart enough or talented enough to be a part of God’s church.

Those people need to hear God’s love song – the marvelous song of how Jesus died on the cross for us; that beautiful melody that sings of forgiveness and life everlasting; that refrain that reminds us that no matter what life brings, we are not alone: Jesus is with us.

If we don't sing that song of love and faith to others, then who will? Christ isn't like that junior high band director who says, "Now, if you're not sure of your part, just pretend to play." No, Christ boldly says to us, "I have forgiven you. I have saved you. I have gifted you. I have equipped you. So now I expect you to boldly play and sing out your song of faith." How willingly and joyfully we play out our song of faith is a direct reflection of our love and devotion to God.

In the eyes of God, love is always an action word. It is impossible to truly love God and then to just sit on stage with our instrument without ever making a sound. Those who truly love God find a way to make beautiful music. We take the risk of faith and blow our hearts out, even when we are not fully sure of our parts. We entrust our lives and our talents into God's hands, knowing that God can do miracles with even the simplest of sound.

The kind of love that Jesus speaks of this morning always finds its expression in daily life. It reveals itself when we gather at a funeral home and sit with those who are grieving the loss of loved ones. It reveals itself when someone takes the time to call and says, "I'm worried about you. How are you doing?" It reveals itself when members of this congregation gather in nursing homes and celebrate Holy Communion with those who cannot make it to this Sunday celebration.

The love of God reveals itself when someone who has never before turned in a Time and Talent sheet prayerfully asks God, "Show me how you want me to serve." The love of God reveals itself when people who don't see eye to eye in matters of faith and politics are still willing to worship side by side, and work together for the sake of God's kingdom. These are just a few examples of what Jesus means when he says, "Just as I have loved you, love one another."

Is your life defined by love? Is love your only goal in life? It's easy to love people in general, to affirm that love is a good thing and something that we all should do. But it's another thing altogether to put that love into action, to make love concrete in our daily lives through our attitudes and actions toward others.

It is up to us to make God's love real to the world. If others are to come to know God's amazing love, then we must find a way to express it in our daily lives. Every moment of every day presents itself as an opportunity.

Are we willing to boldly play out our song of faith? Or will we be one who chooses not to play, unsure if it is the right moment, and nervous how others will respond? Let me share a secret: there is never a wrong time or a wrong place to share with others the love of God in Christ Jesus.

So strike up the band, Jesus says. God has blessed us with a beautiful song of love to share with the world. Dare to play it. Dare to sing it. Dare to love. Let the songs God has given us to sing and play be silent no more. Amen.